

Hand's Span

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We were allowed into the large, outdoor cages at the Centre. Inside I could sit quietly and watch. The monkeys would use me as an object to climb on; a fuzzy, hairy thing to clean their hands on. Whatever I was to them, I was not inimical. We had much in common: fingers that move, sneezing, pouchy places in the face that can contain food. These, on me, the mangabey named Matthew regularly inspected. Striding up to the seated me, or plopping down on top of me, with cool fingers and surprising gentleness, he pried open my lips and levered open my teeth to probe delicately in the space which should hold some slightly macerated fruit or plant part. His disappointment registered: with quicker jabs he probed again. Surely so rounded a structure must be full. Frustrated, he left, but I was enthralled. Not only had the monkey made contact with me, he had done so in terms familiar to him; there was, therefore, not only an acceptance of sorts, but a categorization of me as something familiar, and more than that: similar. But faces are readily seen; what of structures whose resemblance is transformed? The shod foot is a meaningless appendage. Matthew finds baring it a fascinating process. He watches; pulls on laces, mouths rubber and canvas, sniffs at socks. Toes. The fiveness is investigated. His hand riffles the digits and plucks each one, twisting, pulling, riffling again. The similarity stops where mobility and function end. My toes cannot return the touching, grabbing motion. The shape to which they are attached, inflexible, cannot respond to his gestures. He rushes off, returns to leap upon a shoulder and groom the more responsive hair. Sometimes I dare to peek into his brown eyes with their lustrous lashes. This he tolerates a fragile moment before he must turn away. But in that instant, it is as if. The illusion is probably mine. The cage adds to the

impression that he comes to me. Where else could he have gone? I as novelty certainly have more significance than I as transformed monkey. The limitations of our contact seem clear.

Later and elsewhere, amongst monkeys that range freely within the purview and constraints of human regulation, there is more spontaneity to the exchange. These are *Macaca sylvanus* on Gibraltar. I have come to study two groups whose circumstances are unusual amongst primates: they roam quite freely on the peninsula inhabited also by twenty-five thousand people. No one really knows how long monkeys have been in that little space, two and one-half miles long by three-quarters of a mile wide, but I can track them back at least two centuries. Legend takes over where historical documents are missing, and the protection of the British Colonial Government extends to these animals because of their legendary role in saving this outpost, and thus the Empire, from invasion. There may be truth to this tale: macaques give warning barks when they are disturbed, which would certainly awaken sleeping sentries, and foil a sneak attack. But it is how the Gibraltarians feel about this mythopoeic event that is important. They revel in it. The idea that these pests, mischief makers, clowns could have saved an empire is humorous, touching, incredible, aggrandizing: the image of Gibraltar expands; the history of the settlement is enhanced; the significance of the colony is assured. The ambivalence the people feel towards the animals is resolved in favor of the monkeys.

Perhaps the monkeys have lived here with people since forever; perhaps the monkeys preceded the people by thousands of years - Gibraltar being a refuge habitat for what remains of a circum-mediterranean distribution of the species ancestral to all macaques. Their numbers are diminished now and directly reflect the vicissitudes of human existence. As the human population has grown, the competition for land space has become acute and the solution has been to curtail the size of the monkey population. Warfare has played a part, whether through stressing the population or more directly. The number of monkeys during the period of World War II fell so low that only importations from Morocco saved the population. The decision to bring in monkeys is said to have come from no less a personage than Winston

Churchill, who, recognizing the morale value of such an act for Great Britain as well as locally in Gibraltar, issued the order. Initially held in cages, where many of the imported monkeys succumbed to a variety of illnesses, the survivors were finally freed and allowed to roam the upper parts of "the Rock" Ultimately two groups were formed, separated by a quarter of a mile. One group met people daily and became a regular attraction both for the Gibraltarians and for the increasing number of tourists. The other group remained on military property which, until that land was transferred to civilian authority twenty years ago, could be visited with permission only.

What a marvel to sit near a monkey-made path, beneath the trees where the monkeys rested--acknowledged by them, known to them, ignored by them. When I am allowed to share the quiet as intense as meditation, insights come. More accurate, moments of awareness come of what was happening in monkey terms. Earlier, doing fieldwork in Africa, I had tried to start with accepted theory and fit behaviors to that constraint. In Gibraltar it became apparent that it was appropriate to listen and watch and first describe, waiting for knowledge before theorizing.

Wilma is old, nearly twenty. Her aged face is overhung with brows so heavy they block her vision, and like a person wearing bifocals, she tilts her head backward to gain a clear view. She occupies a curious position. She is the last to eat, the last to get a sunny spot, is always a distance from the others, is easily supplanted if there is some "goody" some other monkey wants. But she is SOMEBODY in the group in ways more subtle than contemporary theory can accommodate. Everyone in the group, particularly the young, attend to her every move. They monitor her vocalizations and gestures as they do no one else's, and they imitate her. If Wilma gives a warning bark, everyone looks where she directs; if the group is heading up the hill but Wilma lies down facing the opposite direction, the group will return and wait for her to move. And Wilma is a proven mother. For ten years and more she has birthed viable offspring who have come to take their places in the group. Perhaps her wisdom gives her her place within this group; she has watched the transition of her range from restricted land to public park and has learned to discriminate between those who would leave her be and those who would torment her. She sits by me. She is lush with the oil

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from eating olives too small to be of human use, from eating blade and leaf and flower and seed and the odd insect. The perfume of her fur is elusive--hard to catch and hold on to, but powerful when it drifts to me. I am overwhelmed by sun and scent and the warmth and the pressure of her flank touching mine. I do not move. Perhaps I do not breathe. The preciousness of this moment restrains me as much as the surety that a quick move would alarm her, perhaps resulting in injury to me. We look together towards the sea. My hair, her fur, blown by breezes reaching up the hillside: we sit like this for some time. Do we share in contemplation? (I would like to think so.) And then she leaves, the aged and roughened skin on her feet and bum make scuffling sounds as she moves off. Later that summer she gives birth to a female. Custom decrees that the Governor choose a name from amongst those who have contributed in some way to the Colony. The human is honored by connection to the monkeys because of the legend of how they saved the Empire. There is whimsy in this too; and ambiguity in having a monkey for a namesake.

Wilma is the most practiced of mothers. Her confidence makes her casual. Her experience gives her sure knowledge. The infant is raised unrestrained, undisciplined. Wilma brings Rosemary to me. I proffer seeds, which Wilma takes, her moist lips bending directly to the hand now held in hers, Rosemary at her belly. My extended hand is close to the infant's head, and she, perhaps not distinguishing digit from teat, grasps my little finger and begins to suck. Her gums are roughened by teeth forming beneath their surface. Her tongue works on the digit to extract what should be there. Wilma sees and ignores. I stay in that cramped position, unaware that I am cramped, unaware that I have not moved, totally concentrated on Wilma eating from my hand, feeling Rosemary suck my finger. I am no threat to them.

Nor to Mark, the male leader. He too has reached his second decade. He is scarred, one finger permanently distended from an old break, nearly toothless. His upper incisors are gone and he too has hugely overhanging brows that block his seeing. He deigns to play with the younger males. They do a kind of football ritual, bopping each other's shoulders but with no force, lest the gesture be misinterpreted. Shorter at the shoulder than most

adult males, Mark seems to have put his strength into his maleness, growing robust rather than tall, heavily muscled and emphatic in the genitalia. He is formidable. He is graceful for all his bulk, and swift despite his age. That he commands respect is apparent from the quick response his gestures get. He needs merely to look at another individual for that one to cower, or run, or stop what s/he is doing. I am impressed. I also see that because he is wise and experienced, he can afford to receive instruction from the young males--because he is old, perhaps he also needs to. A dog comes into their range; the adolescent males grunt; a juvenile gives the warning bark - Mark does not react. Is this because he knows the dog; knows dogs; knows there is no real danger? The adolescents intensify their gestures; one rushes towards Mark grunting. Mark turns slowly and ambles towards the dog, grabs it at the hips and flings it. The dog flees.

In the tradition of adult males on Gibraltar, Mark is allowed to hold Rosemary. From the first day of her life he carries her almost incessantly, until the next youngster is born. When Mark is around, I am not worried about the other monkeys. Even when an infant with an anxious mother or babysitter nearby strays towards me, despite the threat, I do not worry. Mark will intercept the young one, or threaten it away. When Mark sits by me, he holds my arm. The power of his grip surprises me. I am not hurt, nor does that seem to be his intent. He sits by me, holding me with both hands and sometimes an odd foot. He too is perfumed, muskier than Wilma but with that same ephemeral delicacy. I relish this contact. I do not seek it--I do not wish to intrude--but I accept it as a gift. I accept this as an acceptance; as permission to know more, to enter into an alien domain. Once, I tease Mark. I cannot resist. He is sitting on top of my tiny rented car, his leg dangling so that his foot is just above the window. Slowly, without a sound, I lower the window and reach my hand out to tickle his foot. It is coarse and toughened and he reacts to this unexpected sensation with a start that makes me giggle. He cannot respond; his senses lack this humor.

Mark bites an official at the prison which is located within his group's range. He is shot. I am not forewarned; I cannot intervene. When I find out, it is too late. They say it is because he is old anyway. A sharpshooter from the army was called in. One

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bullet. Mark never heard the noise they tell me. I am not permitted to see him because of the blood. But I am offered the death bullet. I am guarded from the sight of blood but not from seeing the agent of the death which made the blood. This shift in values is hard for me.

The loss of Mark has repercussions. The male who takes over is young, lacks majesty. Disorder follows; sub-adult males are badly injured--one gets a broken arm and has to be put down--females are attacked. In time Ben secures his position; change continues. It is a dynamic system, this monkey troop: change is the only constant. Wilma dies and is not quite replaced by Rosemary. Wilma's sister Bridget dies and all the others I first knew go, are gone, are replaced or not quite by offspring. And I attend these events, noting, recording patterns and non-patterns.

I am honored with a namesake who grows to maturity and whom I witness involved in political events. One winter in the early 1980s, four young males left their natal troop high up on the Rock, where I had known Wilma and Mark and Ben, and went to the other group. Within the first few days of their arrival, they engaged one of the two incumbent adult males, Jimmy, in a dreadful fight. Under attack from front and behind, he must have lost track of where he was. The fight took him to the edge of a cliff from which he fell or was thrown to his death. Our autopsy of him indicated that he had broken his neck along the cliff wall before he hit the bottom. Jimmy had been in his prime. He had shared leadership of the group for over ten years with an old male called Sam. How sensible was their division of leadership and without serious competition: Jimmy predominated when the group was "in the bush," Sam when they were among people. Both bred and neither was the exclusive partner of any female, although friendships and persevering relationships were obvious. One of the four young intruders, Jake, made a play to stay in this group. He was wary of Sam, but did not challenge him. My namesake was the means by which Jake became integrated. Wherever Jake went, Frances followed. She pursued him relentlessly, posturing for him to groom her whenever he stopped moving. The more he did so, the more he relaxed; the more she reciprocated, the more that bond was reinforced. Grooming, and remaining

with him, she gradually led him closer to the group. Within a couple of weeks, Jake came face to face with Sam. Only a few feet separated them. Frances went and groomed Sam, then returned and groomed Jake. She continued bridging and Jake came closer. Sam appeared tense, but unperturbed. The distance closed; Frances continued grooming each male alternately until only her body separated them. She had succeeded in bringing the stranger, the intruder, within a hand span's distance from the old male. Then she left. The two males looked at each other, and Jake began to groom Sam. For the time being, at least, Jake could stay.

This was my last visit to Gibraltar. Other researchers were coming in with paradigms that neatly identified every activity; predicted every move; obscured the complexity and texture in favor of the paradigm. It was time to move on, to see if my description of social process which I had learned in two small groups, each with only seventeen individuals, applied to larger groups. The theme of urban monkeys, of animals ranging freely within a context of human constraints, was not unique to Gibraltar. There is another British colony where macaques live, also a peninsula, but with a vastly larger human population-six million--and a very different cultural framework: Kowloon, the mainland side of Hong Kong. It seemed a propitious move.