

Monkey business: Unwanted lessons

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [September 9, 2008](#) issue

In *Transforming Church*, Kevin Ford tells the story of a scientific experiment involving four monkeys and some bananas at the top of a pole in their cage. At first the monkeys competed against each other for the bananas, and the strongest ones got the most. The weaker ones had to find strategic times to get their bananas. But all of the monkeys were able to eat regularly.

Then the scientists changed the environment by putting a pail of water at the top of the pole. Every time a monkey tried to climb the pole, he got doused with water and was unable to reach the bananas. Eventually all four monkeys learned to stop going after the bananas. Then the scientists took the water away. But the monkeys, having learned from experience, didn't attempt to climb the pole even though the threat had been removed.

When the scientists replaced one of the original monkeys, the new monkey started climbing for the bananas. But the three original monkeys grabbed the newcomer by the tail, yanked his feet and pulled him down. They were trying to protect him from being doused by water that wasn't even there.

The scientists gradually replaced each of the original monkeys with a new monkey, and these were replaced with other monkeys through several generations. As Ford notes, "For a while, there was more tail pulling and leg yanking. Over a few generations, however, another interesting phenomenon occurred: The newest monkeys crawled into the room, stared at the bananas, but never even tried to climb the pole! No competing. No water. No tail pulling. No leg yanking."

Obviously, bad experiences wound us and cause us to quit aiming high, even for things that are natural to us, that we love and that are crucial for our well-being. We help others avoid being wounded in the ways we've been wounded—and they do the same for us. We think we are learning from experience.

But bad experiences may teach us unwanted lessons that can diminish us and others who come after us. The lessons are passed on from generation to generation,

and the memories are sufficient to prevent even monkeys who have never been doused from trying to get to the bananas. Even if we ourselves have not been wounded, we lose our sense of purpose. A whole culture of dysfunction develops, in which there is a lot of activity on the ground but activity without direction—and without direction we lack the nourishment we most need.

Ford delivers the challenge for the church: “We preach and teach about bananas. We cast a vision for eating bananas. We develop pole-climbing training programs. . . . We read lots of books about bananas. We conduct 12-step support groups for people who are starving for bananas. We argue over which side of the pole the bananas should be on. We elect people who represent our side of the pole. But no matter what we do, nobody ever seems to get around to eating the bananas.” We no longer know why we do what we do.

“What distinguishes you from a Rotary Club?” a bishop asked a congregation that had become weak after several bad experiences with pastors. He was trying to start a conversation about mission and purpose, but his question stumped his listeners.

I have seen pastors, bishops, seminary deans and presidents stumped—or rendered inarticulate—by similar “mission and purpose” questions, and I’ve been in similar positions myself. We are so focused on the survival and maintenance of organizations we lead that we forget about our mission—and pass on that forgetfulness to later generations.

I am haunted by Gregory the Great’s description of “crookbacked” leaders in *Pastoral Care*:

The crookbacked is one who is weighed down by the burden of earthly cares, so that he never looks up to the things that are above, but is wholly intent on what is underfoot in the lowest sphere. If at any time he hears something good about the heavenly fatherland, he is so weighed down by the burden of evil habit that he does not raise up the face of his heart; he just cannot lift up the cast of his thought, being kept bowed down by his habitual earthly solicitude.

All of us are aware these days that a central task of a leader is to cast a vision for the organization. But some of us have forgotten how to look up to heaven and no longer remember where to find the bananas, so whatever vision we cast is paltry, ineffective and perhaps even myopic. Recovering that capacity will involve more

than handy techniques for leadership; it will involve unlearning bad habits, taking risks, and inviting other monkeys to take risks with us as we rediscover the joy of finding the bananas and eating them with delight.