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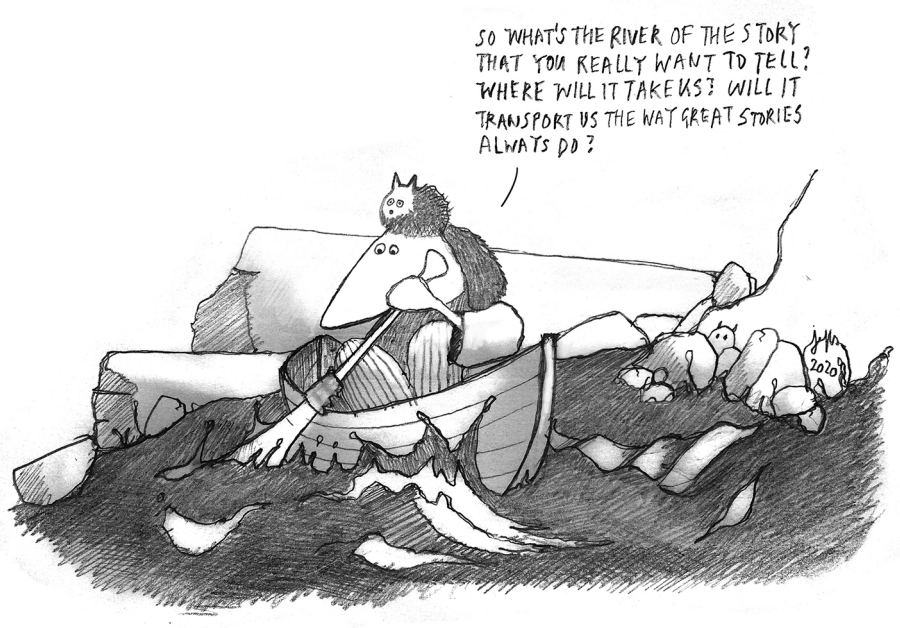
STICKY WICKET

Corona III – stories

Mole



Hi there. It's a gorgeous day here; I hope where you are it's the same. And I'm enjoying it because: (a) I cannot leave my house, and (b) it is *always* better to enjoy the day than not. Welcome to week three. I hope you're hanging in there. And if you are a clinical care provider, clinical lab worker, or someone researching this terrible virus and you are just taking a much needed break, I am standing at my window, loudly banging a pot and pan together, in your honor (I've heard this is something they do each evening in New York City, in honor of the first responders and health care workers, and it can be heard throughout the city).

And then there is this: On Tweezer, god has 6.1 followers. And 'he' follows only one – Justin Beeber. (That wasn't meant as inspiration, it was meant to make you laugh. Sometimes we need that.)

Last time we talked about things we can do to be useful in this terrible time, and I gave a hasty and very incomplete list. Because I tend to do that, make lists, when I'm nervous and distracted. As I recall, not being distracted was on the list. Here's one that might not have been: be kind to each other. Not everyone has time on their hands for multiple virtual committee and administrative meetings; many have children at home who need distraction (and are distracting) and simply do not have time (or daycare) to do the busy work you may wish them to do. If you know someone who is quarantined, shop for them and get them what they need. Mentors/supervisors, support your graduate students and other trainees; hopefully they are being financially supported through this crisis, but if not, they should be (fight for this if not). And tell them that we are all in the same boat – they are not losing a critical time period while the rest of the world bypasses them; we are all frozen in time. In fact, everyone needs to understand this. The tenure clock has stopped, the grant renewal clock has stopped, the time to the deadline of your paper revision has stopped. Take the break. When the clocks start ticking again, you'll wonder why you were so anxious to rejoin the fray. (Of course, we all want things to get back to normal, whatever that is. But still, be still for now. Still. It's okay.)

I was virtually speaking with Red Fox, Dolphin, and Quokka (look him up) the other day, when we got together for a drink (it was 8 am for Quokka, so he only had a beer). They all know colleagues who have eschewed the directive to stay at home, entreating their non-virology research labs to stay at work because the research was just more important. Really, noted Dolphin, is it worth risking the lives of your trainees and those around them (and those around yourself) to get one more paper into the Journal of Mildly Interesting Science? Quokka said that they should "get a life," in the most literal sense.

Red Fox talked about virtual scientific meetings and seminars. Some of these are happening in the coming weeks (some are happening already, I attended one yesterday). There is much to recommend them. But Red Fox worries that because there is essentially no cost for us to attend these (although we expect that registration costs will come in time to bolster the administrative effort), they will persist after this is over (please, picture this being over). In her experience, the real value of scientific meetings is in the space between, the times when we discuss our ideas, initiate and solidify collaborations, and just plain socialize. I've talked about this before; those of us who are primates learn trust through social interactions, picking insects out of each other's hair. And this is trust that is essential; there are scientists, like Red Fox, Dolphin, and Quokka, who I would believe if they told me that, based on their experiments, cells sing popular songs (probably explicit rap songs,

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if Red Fox said it). There are others I would not believe if they said that today is Tuesday (unless I confirmed it myself). That's how it is, and we learn this through interacting. And most of the time, we interact at scientific meetings. (Of course, by 'we' I mean scientists; there are plenty of mammals I interact with in other ways.) Please god, don't let these go away forever (ask Justin Beeber to help, he's got a lot of pull).

But that isn't what I wanted to talk about ("Really, Mole?" you say, "You have something you are just now getting around to?" Yes, I do. I'm just a little distracted). It is the power of narrative. And by narrative, I am talking about telling stories. Those of you who are humans, know that we have been telling stories since before the written word (we insectivores also have always told stories, although ours tend to be predominantly about insects). Narrative lets us remove ourselves from our reality into the stream (sometimes river) of the story, it can help us forget the problems of today (of which we have so many) and remember what is important. But with respect to remembering, the narrative of right now, the one we are writing, must be remembered. Avoiding the same mistakes, of course, but also recalling the heroes of now (again, of which we have so many).

Here's the thing. Science is narrative. We strive to approximate truth as we interpret our experiments and data. But it is a story. And of course, the details of our story can change, and frequently do. As I've often said, it isn't that our conclusions are true or not true, it is that they are useful or not useful. If the results cannot be reproduced, or if the experiments we design, based on your conclusions, do not support them, then your narrative was not useful. But the wonderful stories we have of how things work, and how we can fix them when they do not, drive our passion for this thing we do, this biomedical research thing.

So, if you are sitting at home right now, navigating the online paths between virtual meetings, writing and reviewing papers, or thinking about your projects and those of your colleagues, perhaps take a few minutes to do something else. What is the narrative of your research? What is the emerging story, and how can you tell it in the most evocative way? Is it a good story? A great one? Will it transport us, the way all great stories do? And if you are having trouble with that, then how about this: What is the story that you really *want* to tell? As scientists, we cannot make up our stories, we have to tie them irrevocably to rigorous experimental results. But maybe this is a chance, while we wait out this terrible situation, to think about what we would have to accomplish to tell the story we want to tell.

Help us forget. And then help us remember. See you next week.