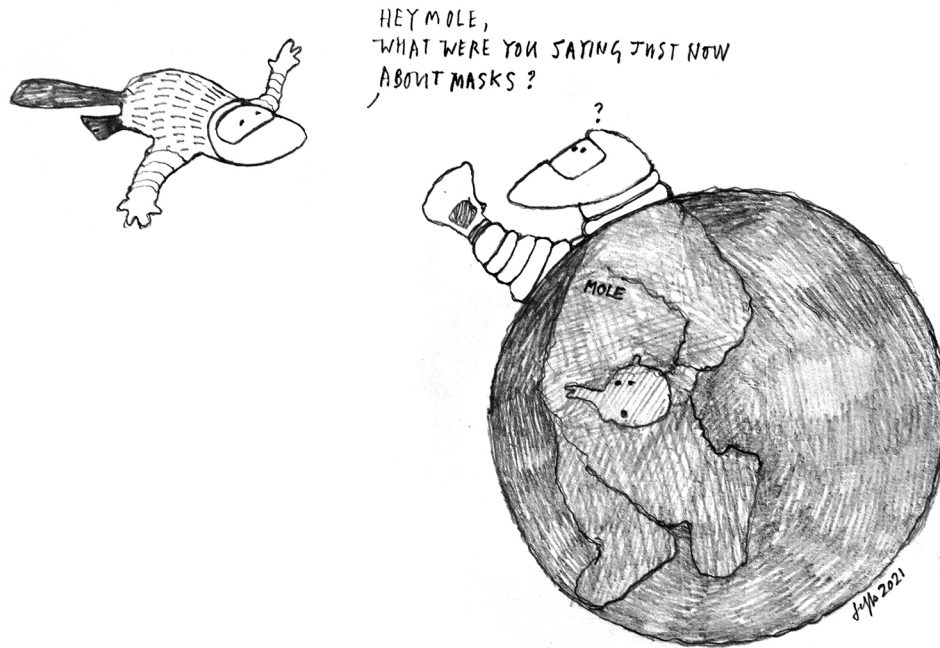


## STICKY WICKET

## Corona XXXII – bursting the bubble

## Mole



Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - [www.peterjeffsart.com](http://www.peterjeffsart.com)

I can see clearly now the rain is gone. I can see all obstacles in my way. Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind. (Sing it with me!) Gonna be a bright (bright!) bright sunny day! And yes, it is! My arm is a little sore, because yesterday I got the first round of my vaccine injection and I'm looking forward to the next one. Okay, actually it is cold and gray, but hey, I don't care. Oh, yes I can make it now the pain is gone. All of the bad feelings have disappeared. Here is that rainbow I've been praying for. It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright) sunny day!

Johnny Nash recorded that song in 1971, but I'm listening to Jimmy Cliff's version, which he did a couple of decades later (and a few decades ago). I think he did it for the soundtrack of 'Cool Runnings', the movie about the Jamaican Olympic bobsled team, which was a lot of fun. Oh, and John Candy was in it, and there just weren't enough movies with John Candy. I mostly remember him from 'Second City TV', and his version of 'Ben Hur,' featuring the Three Stooges (he played Curly). I know, you have to have seen it to know what I'm talking about, but it's worth finding in the e-verse. I'm in a good mood.

If you're just joining us, we were talking about bubbles – not soap bubbles, but the information bubbles in which we live (and I have confessed to living in such a bubble, although hopefully one that reflects reality to at least a reasonable extent). But as we know, there are millions (perhaps billions) of people who live in a bubble in which the Terrible Pandemic (TP) has been exaggerated and (in at least one version of this dark bubble) where it is a hoax.

The efforts to burst this bubble by providing carefully vetted and sourced information have continued to proliferate in the news media, social media and in daily interactions. Indeed, I have been exhorting you for many weeks to take up the banner of science

and speak out about the data and facts relating to the virus, safety measures and vaccines. We all know that honest, fact-based discussion is the only sane way to confront this outrageous situation and attempt to turn at least some of these misguided people. In recent weeks, stories of 'COVID deniers' who have faced illness and death and have finally come around are seen as one way to do this. "If I can change my mind, so can you."

But none of this has worked. Polls from last spring and as recently as last month have shown no change in the numbers of people who insist that all claims of the severity of this calamity are overblown (remaining between about 30–40% in many countries). Daily footage of overwhelmed hospitals, hourly updates of deaths for the day, and the heartfelt, sincere pleadings by doctors and nurses on the front lines do not change this situation. Because, by definition, none of this can penetrate the bubble in which these people live.

There are less harmful information bubbles about the TP. There is a meme, a recurring story, that there are such things as 'COVID parties', in which people who know they are infected get together with many who are not, with the aim of actually promoting infection (even offering prizes to those who test positive afterwards). These stories are reported and received with outrage, stirring efforts to educate these terribly misguided (can we say "stupid?") people. Many of these stories have been debunked, and the urban folklore expert Benjamin Radford has pointed out that it is a variation of an older urban legend of 'bug chaser' stories about people trying to contract HIV.

Then again, I personally experienced a 'bug chaser' event. When I was a very young Molet, before there were vaccines for chickenpox, parents would bring their children to play with infected children to contract the illness. My parents did this for

my sister and me. This way, we simultaneously got sick, allowing our mother to care for us together (I had already been through other dangerous childhood diseases, for which there also were no vaccines). So, while I respect Radford's evaluation, I think it is still possible that there are people who are contracting this willingly. But what do I know? He's probably right about this. If not, then I hope that nobody is *still* doing this.

But that isn't what I wanted to talk about. ("Really, Mole?" Yes, I know, *focus*.) Thinking about parties got me thinking about party games, which led me to an idea about how we *might* be able to burst the horrible COVID misinformation bubbles out there, at least for some people. Maybe. I'll get to the game in a bit, but first I want to tell you a story (it's short).

A couple of years ago, well before the TP, a concerned friend approached me for help. It seemed she had a friend (and I know that the 'friend' wasn't her, so this wasn't one of those "I've got this friend who can't stop his hiccups – *hic* – oh, okay, that friend is me" things) who had decided not to vaccinate her kids. My friend had given her friend all of the facts and history of vaccination and had debunked the putrid myths that continue to circulate due to anti-vaxxer posts (who *are* these people, and what do they get out of this? Anyway, that's for a different time), and she was hoping that hearing from an expert might help. I said that I was happy to do that, but in my experience, people who live in that particular bubble (like most bubbles) don't particularly care about expert opinion, of which there is plenty. So, I did an experiment. I suggested that she tell her friend that I had it on very good authority that the arguments against vaccinating children were actually created by internet trolls working for enemy governments (I provided information regarding which government, but choose your own) as part of a long-term plan to weaken our society, and that it was working very effectively (I had no support for this, since I had just made it up). A day later, she told me that her friend had thought about it and had made an appointment to vaccinate her kids. I know, this is an '*n* of one,' but it made me think I was onto something. We can argue about whether this was ethical; probably not, since I was promoting something that *could* be true but was probably a lie. Still, sometimes it is better to tell a small lie than a painful truth. Teddy Roosevelt said that. Actually, no, it was Robin Williams, playing Teddy Roosevelt in 'Night at the Museum'. But he was great, too.

Now, I don't know if this particular small lie would work on the COVID clowns (their word, or at least the word given to them by an ex-denier we met last time). The idea might be along the right lines, but I haven't come up with the right counter story; however, I do have a party game that could help.

In 1966, Charles Foley and Neil Rabens filed a patent for "Apparatus for playing a game wherein the players constitute the game pieces," and trademarked a game called 'Pretzel.' The game was adopted by the Milton Bradley company, who changed the name to 'Twister.' It was a huge success and is still widely played at parties (although not now: do *not* play Twister with your friends until we are out of this). Even by me (I was pretty good at it in my more flexible days). In case you don't know (and you really should), it consists of a large mat on which there are colored dots, and a spinner that assigns a right or left hand or foot of a contestant to a particular color, which they have to do without letting the rest of their body hit the mat. It can be pretty fun.

So, I'm making a Twister game with different conspiracy theories on the colored dots. Internet trolls, deep state, multinational pharmaceutical companies, Elvis Presley (why not, he's alive, right?), Area 51, cell phone towers and whatever else I can think of. Then I'll tape labels on my hands and feet that say "promoting the idea that COVID is no worse than the flu," "the vaccine makes you sick," "numbers are going up because tests are going up" and "masks don't work." Spin the dial, and I'll put that hand or foot on the dot. When I fall, the *last* one will be the message. Such as: "Space beavers are promoting the idea that masks don't work, so that you will breathe space beaver germs that turn everyone into Elvis impersonators". I will then put this up on all the social media accounts I can fake (#spacebeavers!). I'll keep doing it until I get tired, and then wake up and do it again. Fight misinformation with more (but, ultimately better) misinformation. You do it too (I'll spin for you, you spin for me). Get more people to do it as well. Together, we'll put out so much nonsense that eventually, maybe, people inside the bubbles will not know what to believe from these platforms, and (maybe, maybe) they will turn to actual information from real sources for their facts.

Okay, of course this isn't real. It's probably just me trying to find *some* way to poke a hole in this ridiculous bubble in the hope that we can finally burst it (without the person in it having to face calamity, or take up space in an overcrowded ICU). And the idea of flooding the internet with false information to disrupt false information isn't mine either. It was proposed in the novel 'Fall, or Dodge in Hell,' which I recommend. And Milton Bradley doesn't make Twister anymore (Hasbro acquired Milton Bradley in 1984).

But you can still get it from Hasbro, I think. In fact, you should. And then, when all of this is over, really over, we'll get together and play. It will be hysterical. And by the way, if you go to PubMed and put in 'space beavers' (no quotes), you will get 46,821 results (as of today, and trending. Really, go ahead and try it). So maybe this is working? I'm just saying.