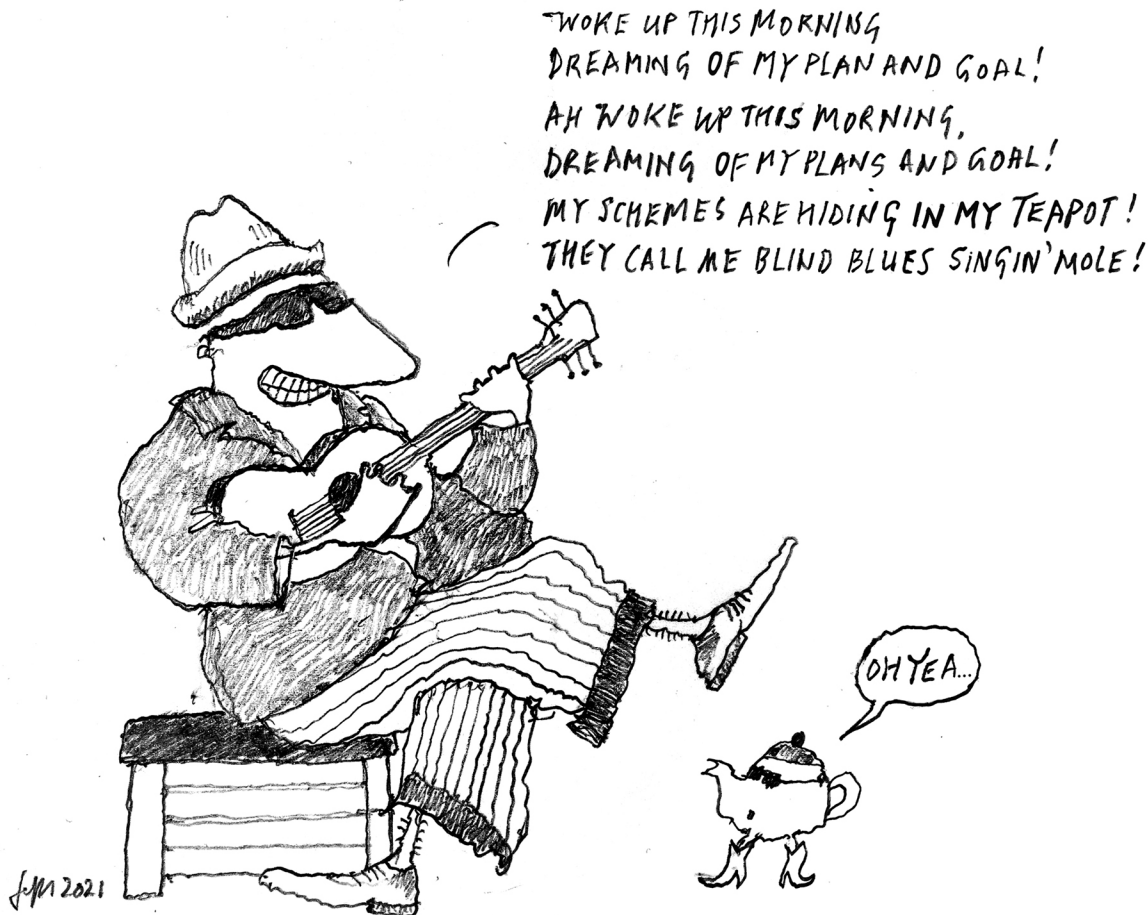


STICKY WICKET

Corona XXIX – four minutes

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Hurrah! Hooray! After weeks of brutal cold, I'm sitting in the sun on an absolutely glorious day! I hope it's nice where you are, too. And what's *really* nice, is that vaccines for this Terrible Pandemic (TP) are on their way, *actually going into the arms of health care workers*. I hope I'll get mine someday; I certainly want it now. Maybe by spring, I hope. Maybe sooner, I *double* hope.

Despite all my optimism, things are pretty bad out there. And getting worse. I should know better than to be optimistic. As the author James Branch Cabell (which he pronounced 'CAB-ell') once said, "The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears that this is true." And as Mark Twain wrote, "The man who is a pessimist before 48 knows too much; if he is an optimist after it, he knows too little." And I suspect someone other than the Indie rock band, the audience, said "A pessimist is never disappointed," but it's a great song anyway. All of the arguments say I should be a pessimist. But I'm not. So there.

But there are very good reasons to be pessimistic, of course. More people than ever are being infected; more people than ever are going

into hospitals. There are vaccines, but we have no idea when we might actually get them. And every four minutes more than eight people die from the virus in my country. Every four minutes. Under any other circumstances we would call this a major catastrophe, and then another, and another, and on, and on. But we can't do that every four minutes.

Four minutes. There are people who can run a mile in less time. Not me, but some people.

The first person to do this was Roger Banister, who broke the four-minute barrier by six-tenths of a second in 1954. His record lasted 46 days, but I don't remember who beat it. For some reason, running a mile in under four minutes seemed to be a barrier that couldn't be broken (people had been getting close for nine years), until it was, and then after that, others followed. Roger became Sir Roger, and the first one to break his record a month and a half later is still, 'that other guy.' Okay, okay, he was actually John Landy (Quokka reminded me that Landy was Australian, and not just some 'other guy.' Really, anyone who can run a mile in under four minutes is pretty amazing.)

I know you are now expecting me to diverge into my usual tirade about Science, perhaps talking about ‘firsts’ and competitiveness and why I think the whole who-did-it-first thing is counter-productive and can be damaging to the entire enterprise. Indeed, I was about to do that, but then I stopped the automobile moving on the highway of my mind. And maybe you’re ready to step out of this car. You already know that road. You know exactly where it ends. Wait, no, that’s Trinity talking to Neo. But anyway, no, we aren’t going in that direction. Instead, I want to talk about goals, plans, and schemes. (I have no idea why I thought of my stream of consciousness as a sports car on a highway – oh, and it was a sports car. Actually, I don’t know who came up with the idea of consciousness being a stream. Oh wait, yes, I do. It was William James in his *The Principles of Psychology*, which I read a very long time ago. Okay, time to get out of the water, Mole.)

By the time you read this, we will have put 2020 behind us (there’s probably a joke in there about 20/20 hindsight, so please just assume I said something mildly clever, roll your eyes, and read on). And perhaps you made some New Year’s resolutions. This is something many people do and have been doing for a very long time. It started 4000 years ago with the Babylonians, who made promises to the gods to grant them favor in the coming year. And somehow, this meme stuck. But it was Julius Caesar who made the New Year land on the first day of January (in honor of Janus, of course) in 46 BCE, and much later Pope Gregory XII gave us the Gregorian calendar, which many of us use today (I actually spent a wonderful afternoon in the room where this happened a few years ago with my wonderful friend, Prof. Mink and all of his colleagues. I got to wear a funny hat. But I digress. “Really, Mole?” Yeh, it’s all road stops on the highway of my insectivore consciousness. Okay, resolutions...). Most of the time, these New Year’s resolutions are in the form of goals. As in, ‘This year I am going to run a mile in under sixteen minutes’ (that’s a reasonable resolution for me, although I sort of doubt it’s going to happen, because it would involve, you know, running). Then, if you actually want to reach your goal, you make a plan. As in, ‘I’m going to get a new pair of running shoes and run a little every day.’ Not me, of course, but this may be someone’s plan.

I’ve been thinking about something I read recently, regarding happiness. Happiness is important, and so are thoughts about how one may go about attaining it. This might be particularly important now, as the TP drags on and on, and many of my friends, colleagues, and Molets are not as happy as they might be. Maybe you’re feeling this way, too. The opposite of happy. Despite what our teachers told us when we were very small and were explaining the concept of opposites to us, the opposite of happy is not sad. I have it on good authority and through my own experience that the opposite of happy is the blues.

I’m sure you know this, but the blues is a rather specific musical construct. Blues musicians who stray from this during sessions can inadvertently wander into jazz, in which case their band-mates will forcefully drag them back to *proper* blues (I’ve seen this happen

even to the very best; I remember a fantastic guitar solo during a live performance by Robert Cray, when his bass player shook his head and said “jazz, man,” and the master promptly followed with a solid blues line). To compose the most common form, you work with eight bars of music and only three chords (I, IV, and V). Like this: I-I-IV-I-V-IV-I-I/IV/V (although it’s fine to flat the seventh). Now that you know how to play the progression, you need words. Like this. “I woke up this afternoon, turned my laptop on. I woke up this afternoon, turned my laptop on. Had to give a presentation, but all my slides were gone.” Sigh. Opposite of happy. Many people think that one ‘gets into the blues’, but the fact is, one plays the blues to get *out* of the blues. That’s how it is. Besides being a form of music, the blues is a state of mind, and a lot of us are feeling the blues right now.

But that isn’t my point (‘Wait, what? There’s a point?’). I was reading about happiness. The proposal in this essay was that goals and plans do not make us happy. Sure, having a goal is good, and having a plan is a way to attain a goal, but one cannot *plan* to be happy. And yes, happiness can be a goal. The suggestion was that one needs to have a scheme rather than a plan. They are not the same thing. A plan might be, ‘I’m going to learn to play the blues on my guitar.’ A *scheme* might be, ‘The next time I’m stuck in a long Kazzoom meeting, I’m going to play the blues on my guitar, and when someone asks what I’m doing, I’ll unmute and play so they don’t ask me any more questions. And I’ll do that every meeting until people get used to it. And then I’ll start asking others in the chat to get instruments and bring them to our meeting.’ Just thinking about it makes me a little happier. I know I’m not going to do that, but see? It’s not a plan, it’s a scheme. (But *maybe* I’ll do it.)

Roger Bannister ran the mile in under four minutes. Then he spent the next 40 years doing research on the autonomic nervous system. I think he planned to run the mile. But I think he *schemed* to do science. He once said, “The more restricted our society and work become, the more necessary it will be to find some outlet for this craving for freedom...The human spirit is indomitable.” He said this about running, but I bet he felt this way about his science. He is remembered for his four-minute mile, but he often said that he would prefer to be remembered for his contributions to neurology. I think his scheme made him happy (he certainly *seems* to have been happy in his writings).

So, here’s my own, real, (and maybe *indomitable*) scheme. Every day, every online meeting, I’m going to be upbeat and enthusiastic. Every time I go into the lab, masked up and socially distanced, I’m going to shout “Let’s discover something today!” I’m going to remind everyone that, despite how dreadful this TP is, and how agonizing the wait for the vaccine, and how much we long to get all this behind us, there’s this: Despite *everything*, it’s just incredible that we get to do science. Carl Sagan said, “Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.” I’m going to remind myself, and those around me, of that. Yeh, this is a scheme I can do.

And it won’t even take four minutes.