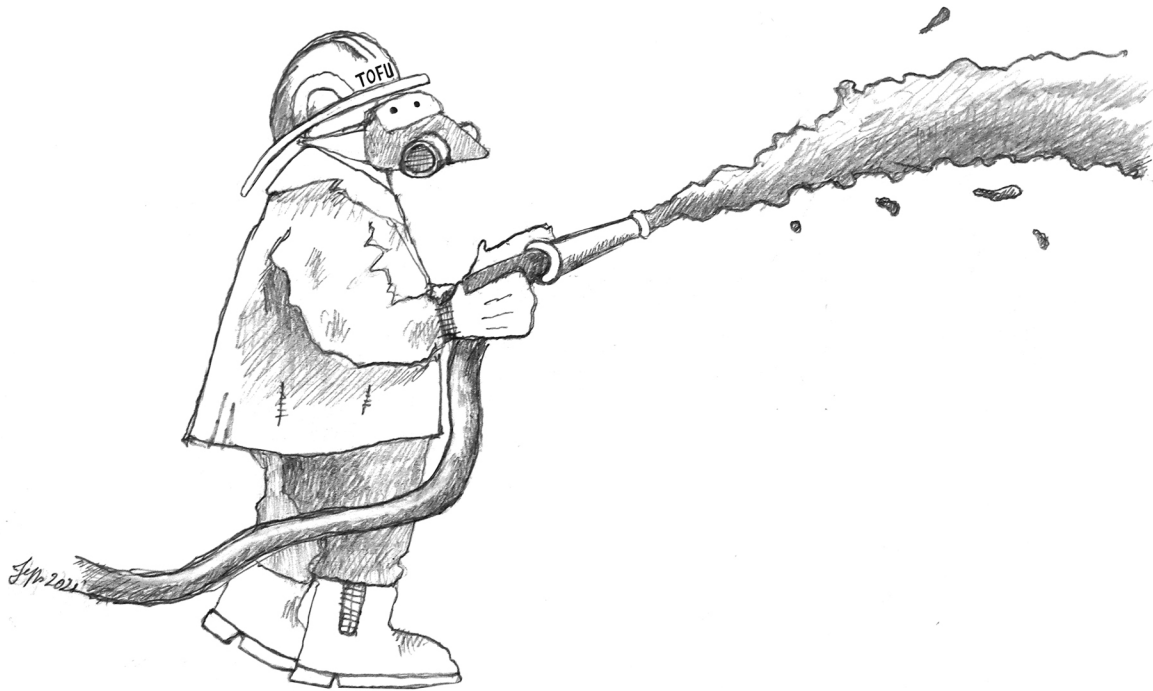


## STICKY WICKET

## Corona XXX – speechless

Mole

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

Howdy! Welcome! Hello! What's happening? Hiya! How goes it? What's up? Yes, I'm playing with my thesaurus, that invaluable tool for writers and word geeks. By definition, a thesaurus is a book that lists words in groups of synonyms and related concepts. And by definition, a synonym is one of two or more words or expressions of the same language that have the same or nearly the same meaning in some or all senses. One synonym for synonym is 'definition.' And by definition, the definition of definition is a statement of the exact meaning of a word, especially in a dictionary (at least in the sense that I use it here).

Why am I going on about words and definitions? Because it is that eventful time of the year that the folks who bring us the OED (which is the TLA for the Oxford English Dictionary, and TLA is the TLA for three-letter acronym) announces their Word of the Year (WOY), which they define as 'a word or expression shown through usage evidence to reflect the ethos, mood or preoccupations of the passing year, and have lasting potential as a term of cultural significance.' In 2019, the WOY was 'climate emergency.'

The Word of the Year should not be confused with the Word of the Day, which appears to be a randomly selected word, and not one 'through usage evidence to reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the passing' day. For example, today's WOD (note the TLA) is 'jough', which is an alcoholic drink, often a spiced, light ale consumed during the winter solstice holiday season. Come to think of it, this might well reflect *my* ethos, mood and preoccupation today. Good WOD, then.

However, this year, the year of the Terrible Pandemic (TP), the Oxfordians (Oxfordites?) have decided that there is *no Word of the Year!* Really? Not 'CoVOID,' 'blursday,' or, I don't know, 'COVID fatigue'? No, they decided that there were *so many* words describing not only the TP situation but also social upheaval, and marketing (really? *Marketing?*), that they just couldn't decide. Apparently, because so many of us are stuck at home, pretending to work (I mean, not me, because I don't pretend not to work, I just don't work), that we invent and share words at an unprecedented rate. (I'm only kidding about not working, because as many of us know, sitting in on interminable Kazzoom meetings *is* work, unless I'm playing my guitar while muted, of course.)

So instead of a WOY, they gave us a list. Which really is not a *thumb-stopping, humaning reader's journey*, but more of a *reading occasion*, with no *brand heat* at all. This was not *solutioning*, in my book, but more of a failed *phygital* attempt at hiding what was clearly a cop-out (cop-out was *not* on the list, since it isn't a new word, it just describes what they did). Oh, but *TLA* did make the list.

I'm telling you this (although not *hypertelling*) because there was one word on the list that I liked: *TOFU*. This is an acronym (although, notably, not a TLA) for 'top of funnel,' defined as 'the moment of awareness.'

About a week ago, I had a TOFU. I was in a four-hour strategic planning meeting at the time. Of course, it was not a *real* meeting, where there would have been at least snacks. Instead, we had a lot of *snackable content*. This is defined as 'information that is easily

digested,' and we had a great deal of it. Hours of it. And well into the third hour, as I hovered over my laptop, a rather loud explosion shook my house. This was followed by another, at which point I took out my earphones and left the meeting. I had video off and was muted, a pretty standard way in which I participate in such meetings – it saves bandwidth, which is my rationalization, but really it's so I can do non-computer related things at the same time, like play the guitar or smoke a cigar, ride in my car or swing on a star. Sorry, I seem to be channeling my inner Dr. Suess. If I've met with you recently, I'm sure you experienced this. Then again, you were probably also in video-off mode, so you could eat a pizza while we talked. Now I want pizza. Why did it have to be pizza? Oh well, back to the story.

I was met at the front of the house by a wave of heat, and the view of a garbage truck encased in a blazing ball of fire. Fortunately, no one was hurt (very fortunately), and once the fire department controlled the blaze, the only real casualty was the truck itself. And my mailbox. But it was at the moment that I met the woman who had been driving and was now recovering her composure (wearing a mask, I noted with appreciation), that I had my TOFU – prior to that, my biggest concern was that she had been injured. Because, really, there was no better metaphor for this past year than a blazing garbage truck. I had actually started the year with a wonderful meeting in the mountains of Austria, skiing with friends and talking science into the night, followed by a nice trip to informally review an outstanding program on cancer metabolism, right before the TP hit. But I count all of that as an extension of *last* year. This year? Burning garbage about sums it up.

But a TOFU is much more than a realization, or in this case, a recognition of something I already knew. It is 'top of funnel', the beginning of understanding, and what I understood was this. The pandemic is much more than a virus that ravages our society and takes lives and jobs away, that tears asunder our assumptions of preparedness and severely tests our resilience. It is much more than developing and testing a vaccine and waiting for its distribution. It is more than months at home and working to figure out how to work in safety (or as close as we can get to safety).

Yes, it *is* all these things, but it is also what my TOFU led me to. (What I am about to say may very well have been obvious to you all along, I'm just saying what I experienced.) The 'top of funnel' for me was that for all we have learned, for all we think we know about this thing we do, this biomedical research thing, we have barely

progressed in our efforts to plumb the ocean of ignorance in which we all swim. Despite all our knowledge, we didn't, and still don't, know what to do. Standing there, next to the driver, gazing at the fireball that had been her truck, watching the firefighters first try water and then switch to chemical retardants, I was frozen in place, thinking about how little we understand how vulnerable we are. The explosions I had heard (a firefighter explained that these were probably not the propane tanks exploding – it was a "clean" vehicle – but rather the large tires making the truly visceral blasts as they erupted in the heat) are happening every day in my country, and perhaps yours. The fire is raging, and there I was, participating just minutes before in what had been a fairly routine meeting. Not that *not* participating would have done anything about the blaze of the TP. Because I don't know what to do.

Don't get me wrong. I fully understand how the vaccines are developed, tested and found to be effective. The fact that this really is no longer 'rocket science' shows me how far we've come (indeed, rocket science is no longer 'rocket science'). We can identify and characterize a virus in remarkably little time, and we know exactly how to go about making a vaccine; at least how to *try* to make a vaccine that *should* work (and there were very scary reasons to fear that they might not, but we got really lucky this time – there is a feline coronavirus for which we have not been able to make a vaccine to date). And we know how to expedite testing (really, this is just a matter of organization and money now). But with all of this, I don't have any idea of how to help the lovely woman who drives a garbage truck (okay, not really a garbage truck, this was a vehicle to collect recyclable waste, but 'garbage truck' is better for the metaphor). Her life has been completely disrupted, utterly turned end-for-end, and I don't have a clue how to fix that. Or help the millions of people who cannot work, or have to work under what are now lethally dangerous conditions. Or do something about the ICUs, emergency rooms and funeral parlors that are full. And this is only the *top* of this funnel.

There was no WOY this year. But the WOY last year was 'climate emergency.' Part of me wishes that it was the WOY this year as well, and probably every year from now on. Because if we can't manage the TP, something we *know* very well how to confront, what are we going to do about that? The fires are burning, everywhere, and not only as metaphors. The thought leaves me speechless.

I'm going to have a jough and think about all this. Join me?