

STICKY WICKET

Corona VIII – strange dreams

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Hey there! It's a lovely, clear, balmy day here – I hope it's nice where you are, too. Kind of dreamy. I've got 'meetings' all day, but I want to take a bit of time, before it all starts, to talk with you. It's either that, or review a paper, so it's a no-brainer.

In ancient times, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, and I was in high school, it was a semi-popular thing to ask a friend, "When was the first time I entered one of your dreams?" I'm not sure why we would ask such a thing, maybe it was a Carlos Castaneda thing. If you don't know who he was, he was an anthropologist who wrote *The Teachings of Don Juan* and then, when that was successful, a bunch of other books about dreaming. And psychotropic substances, which probably also helped to sell his books. So, we would ask this question, which did give our friends pause (unless they had already heard it, and had already asked someone else). The thing is, people and places, as they become a familiar part of our lives, eventually enter our dreams, and there is always a first time. When was the first time you dreamt about the place you're living? When was the first time you dreamt about the lab?

When was the first time you dreamt about COVID-19? I ask this, because yesterday, Ms. Mole and I were talking, and she mentioned her COVIDREAM. And I realized that I had had them, too. I think the first time was after we had started wearing masks, and I dreamed I was wearing one while walking around an eerily empty airport. (Then the mask became a flopping fish, and I was naked in a classroom, about to take a test I had not studied for. You know, dreams.)

Part of the popularity of Castaneda's books was the concept of lucid dreaming, dreams that are exceedingly 'real.' The idea is that we can train ourselves to (a) remember our lucid dreams, (b) recognize, while dreaming, that it is a dream, and (c) eventually control the dream itself. It gets a little fuzzy at this point (for me, but I suspect also in the books) because the implication is that doing this regularly empowers you to control your personality, and perhaps reality itself (like I say, there was a subtext regarding psychotropic substances). I'm not advocating induction into the 'Yaqui way of life' here. But there is an aspect that I do want to try. I'd like to see if the next time I realize I am dreaming a COVIDREAM, I can take control of it. Tell people to socially distance, wear masks, wash their hands regularly, and *stay negative*. It often doesn't work in real life (either I don't tell people in the supermarket to do these things, or I do, and they just shrug). But maybe if I begin to do this in lucid dreams, I will become more convincing when it is not a dream as well. Actually, I tried to do this dream thing last night, when a very friendly person hugged and kissed me (on the cheek), while I was thinking that this is a very good way to spread virus. But, instead of saying something, all I managed to do was wake up. I'll try again tonight, maybe.

We, all of us, have a mandate to *stay negative*. Or, should we prove positive, to isolate, and then become negative again and stay that way. We know how, but here's the thing: we're just so *tired* of it. Tired of singing our handwashing song. Tired of the masks and the gloves and the alcohol wipes. Tired of not touching. Not just

surfaces, light switches, elevator buttons, and door handles, but *people*. Tired of nasal swabs (oh I hope you've done enough of these to be tired of them – if not, you will be. I hope). But we need to do all of this. We need to stay negative.

I know you're tired, too. This is taking a toll on all of us.

Last evening, I met with several friends for some virtual 'tea.' Dolphin was there, as were Puma, Macaque, Lynx and Nuthatch. It was good that we were all virtual, because no one ate anyone (although this only sometimes happened at real meetings, it generally puts a damper on the celebrations). Oh, and this was a real, virtual get-together, not a lucid dream. Lynx was outspoken about his frustration and exhaustion, urging a general return to work, trusting that our highly educated co-workers could and would do so safely. Dolphin (they are great friends) was equally vocal about how this was a terrible idea, and told him to relax. It got testy, and as I say, it was good that nobody could be eaten.

This idea, that we biomedical research scientists are smart enough, and educated enough, to adhere to strict guidelines and therefore should be encouraged to get back in the lab now, not later, is making the rounds. Maybe you've been saying this, too. And while I agree that we should understand how to do this, and I've seen good evidence that this is so, I nevertheless worry that far too many of us will fill our labs far too quickly, given the chance. For every brilliant, relaxed Dolphin, there are several brilliant, edgy, highly competitive Lynxes pacing their lairs and waiting for a chance to spring into full-blown action. And in doing so, there is the great danger that the mandate to *stay negative* will not be met.

But there is another cautionary note here. A week ago, my old friend, Buck (who is not a scientist, but rather a prominent Broadway theater critic, who is currently writing about other stuff, since there will not be a Broadway for a long time) pointed out something that you probably know, but like me, you probably don't take very seriously: *A lot of people out there really hate us*. Smart, productive, highly educated folks are the enemy. The elites. Buck suggested that this is a major reason why many are ignoring the warnings and using 'common sense' as a safeguard, which apparently means doing nothing at all and holding parties in the park with their friends. While I agree with Buck that we will never be able to get through to such people, they really are in the minority (however vocal), and the vast majority of the population looks to us, the biomedical community, for some leadership. We do have to set an example. Masks do much more than reduce our risk of getting sick; they prevent those of us who could not stay negative from doing the same to others. Set an example, every day. If you don't, who will?

I'm very positive about staying negative. I hope you are, too. As we begin the experiment of slowly, safely getting back to work, please keep our mandate in mind. I know we can't wait to get back to worrying about experiments that don't work, laundry lists of things to do from the reviewers of our papers, and counting down the days to our next grant submission. But please do. Wait I mean. Our first, most important thing to do, really, is to stay negative. It's my dream that we do.

See you next week. Sweet dreams.