

STICKY WICKET

Corona I – home alone

Mole

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR BOTTLES OF PAW SANITIZER AND SNOUT MASKS ON CRAIG'S LIST, AGAIN, MOLE, DEAREST?

ME? OH NO, I WAS JUST READING MOLE'S LIST: HIS GUIDE FOR BIOMEDICAL SCIENTISTS SITTING AT HOME!!!



But I also have to say, for the upty-umph time, that life isn't fair. It's just fairer than death, that's all. – William Goldman

Hello. Is there anybody out there? Just nod if you can hear me. Is there anyone at all? Sorry, I know that those aren't the words to the song, but it's been going through my head since I used it a little while ago for my 'hand washing song.' I'm sure you have some of

these, too. I know I'm supposed to sing 'Happy Birthday' until I finish washing, but there are way better songs out there. My own favorite is 'Don't Get Killed' by Andy Breckman (look it up, it's pretty spot on).

Yes, I'm home alone. Not *alone* alone, Ms. Mole is here, too, but *we're* alone, together. You know what I mean. Social distancing in this time of the terrible SARS-CoV2 pandemic. Doing our best and doing what we can. I have more meetings than ever, but all online

now, and of course, I'm in frequent contact with the Molets and with my colleagues.

There is nothing good about this of course, and nothing funny (okay, some of the suggested treatments and political misinformation out there are funny in a very black comedy sort of way, sort of akin to Slim Pickens riding the nuclear bomb like a bronco near the end of Dr. Strangelove. Actually, akin to the whole movie. "Mr. President, we cannot allow a mindshaft gap." Sorry, I'm drifting off topic, as usual. Did you ever notice in this movie that General "Buck" Turgidson has a notebook entitled, "World Targets in Megadeaths?" There I go again. Sorry). Right, there is nothing funny about this. I don't have to tell you that.

But, really, this is sort of my job, to find humor in the things that distress us, frustrate us, and infuriate us in this thing we do, this biomedical science thing. But if there is one thing that is achingly, chillingly clear, if it wasn't already, is that this thing we do *is really, really important*. If you happen to have spent your career studying coronavirus, everyone now knows that what you've learned is important. If you study vaccines, everyone now knows that it's important (even, I hope, some of the anti-vaxer's. Anti-vaxers? However you spell it. But that's being overly hopeful, I guess). But the rest of us? I think that the message is getting through. It's all important. If you study the spike cell in nematodes, it is important. If you study mitochondrial dynamics in tetrahymena, it's important. If you study wing color variation in migrating butterflies, it's important. I know you know that, and I know that you know that I know that you know that. But people are seeing that what we do and what we learn from each other is important, and *that's* important. If a year ago I had harangued a group on FaceBoodle that they need to wash their hands every time they pass a sink, I would have been flamed. Now I get a gazillion 'likes.'

A few years ago, I had a talk with our director, who was toying with the idea of doing away with our virology department (long story). I made a passionate case for why these researchers were so important for our institution, and how much we learn from them. Now, I'm very thankful that they are still there, leading screening efforts and providing counsel. I hope they know that (I think they do).

Here's the thing. If you are not on the front lines of this thing; if you are sitting at home, planning to write another review article that we may not need right now, or looking for something else to do, remember this: You are necessary. The public are anxious and confused, and unlike you, they do not have the background, expertise, or ready access to the literature to make sense of the efforts that are unfolding in real time. People need us to keep up to

date, evaluate the data, get the facts right, and communicate. There are some ways to help. I'm going to put together a Mole list, it's a thing I do. I might call it, "Mole's Guide for Biomedical Scientists Sitting at Home."

But that's for next time. Right now, I want to talk about you. I know you are worried about the lab: Is it secure? Are the cells, mice, worms, flies, etc. going to be okay? Will I still have a research project when this thing is finally over? Of course, I know you are doing all you can. But if you are reading this, it means that you're on a break (I hope that's what it means – really, this is not essential reading!). So, take a break. Look, the lab didn't burn down. There wasn't a flood that wiped out the animal colony. An EMP did not erase all of the files on your server. Hordes of zombies are not converging on your university. (For those of you who have been such things, sorry to bring up a painful memory – not the zombie thing of course, but the others. Actually, sorry to those who have dealt with zombies, in any case.). You're going to get through this. We are. Okay, not if there are zombies. That would be bad.

"But Mole," you say (I'm listening), "I have papers that are in revision, with deadlines imposed by the journals, and I can't get back into the lab to do the work. I've spent years on this paper, and it's stressing me out." I understand. But here's the thing: everyone is in this predicament. I suggest that you communicate with the journal editor, I'm sure they will be flexible.

Indeed, some journals are instituting an interesting solution. In fact, it is something I've been thinking about for a while. If the reviewers found your paper interesting, but identified weaknesses that would have to be addressed by experiments, these journals can decide that rather than requiring the experiments, the authors include a section on 'caveats' (or concerns, or limitations, or etc.) These will highlight potential alternative explanations or missing controls that might affect how a reader will interpret the findings. In many cases, I think, we will find that the 'essential' criticism was not really so essential after all. Perhaps (and this may be a very long shot), we may find that this approach will remain even after we re-emerge into society and rejoin our labs.

On that wonderful, sunny day, when we open our doors and hug our neighbors, and then rush to burrow into our dark, little (wonderful) laboratories, we will find, as we often do after months and months of revisions of our papers, that our ideas are sound, and that our conclusions are justified. Until then, let's remember the words of the great physicist, J. Robert Oppenheimer. "The optimist thinks this is the best of all possible worlds. The pessimist fears it is true." Guess which one I am?

Go have some 'tea.' Text me, I'll join you.