

STICKY WICKET

Corona XLIII – grok

Mole

INTERSTATE 29
LOUD AND CLEAR...
GREX HEADING
SOUTH BOUND
TO SIOUX FALLS.
I GROK THIS...

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs – www.peterjeffsart.com

I'm beginning to grok this ongoing, seemingly never-ending, Terrible Pandemic (TP). I'm not a computer scientist, but 'grok' means more than 'to understand'; when a computer geek (I mean that in the most respectful way) *groks* a system – like a computer language – he, she or they have so thoroughly incorporated it as a part of his/her/their identity that they are completely fluent. They don't just *get* it, they *grok* it.

The term *grok* was invented by Robert Heinlein, in his 'Stranger in a Strange Land.' (I read this almost fifty years ago, and it had a great impact on my teenage self; I have no idea if I would feel the same today. Give it a read and let me know how it holds up?) In the book, the spacecraft Envoy is sent to Mars prior to World War II, and twenty-five years later – after World War III ('Stranger in a Strange Land' was written a long time ago) – a second ship, Champion, returns. They discover that one of the Envoy's passengers, who had been a small child at the time, had survived and had been raised entirely by Martians. (This was a popular theme: the child raised by 'others,' who returns to 'civilization' – always Western civilization – to show us the foolishness of our ways. Like Mowgli, or Tarzan or my own Mark Down. Mark Down

was lost as a small child in a large department store and was raised entirely by mannikins. He intuitively knew the price of *everything*. If you've never read 'Mark Down,' don't feel bad; I never got around to writing it. Where was I? Oh right, 'Stranger in a Strange Land'. Yeh, yeh, yeh, "*focus Mole*." His name is Valentine Michael Smith.

Valentine Michael Smith teaches Earth people to grok (among other things, of course). Grok means *to understand*, but it also means *to drink*, and many other words in English, including *love* and *hate*. To Martians, it is not possible to either love or hate someone unless you *completely* understand them. (The Martians had previously encountered the inhabitants of the fifth planet, and once they grokked them, they then acted, and now all that remains of that planet is the asteroid belt. But they continue to highly revere these extinct people, who they fully grok.)

So, while I don't yet grok the pandemic, I am *beginning* to. I used to think that the virus was all there was to it, and I have spent the last year and more trying to understand it (and our response to it), and I think I do a bit (not as much as a real coronavirus expert, but more than most people). But it has taken a while to grok that it is not just the virus. There is human psychology, the economy, politics,

interpersonal communication (both in person and virtual) and the viral memes that are far more infectious than the virus itself (which fortunately does *not* spread via the internet, unlike the virus in ‘Snow Crash,’ Neal Stephenson’s very funny early novel. But I won’t go there, because “*focus*”).

I started to grok the pandemic when I spoke with people who did not want to be vaccinated. Hey, I see this as part of my job (and I hope you do too). The people I talked to fell into two categories: confident and terrified. The first group (confident) seemed perfectly at ease about their decision not to be vaccinated, and what I gleaned was that this confidence came from a large ‘support group’ of similarly minded people. They shared a number of other positions as well, including (but not limited to) climate change denial, support for authoritarian leaders and, perhaps paradoxically, a fierce belief in ‘personal freedom’ (something they apparently did not think they would lose under authoritarian leadership, since ‘freedom’ really only applies to themselves). These were frustrating discussions, since we struggled to find common ground (and we did struggle – other than the positions they had taken, they were generally ‘nice’ people from a superficial standpoint, although we might not fully agree on the meaning of ‘nice’). The second group, the ‘terrified’, had a visceral fear of the vaccine, and no amount of reasoning or fact checking could assuage this fear. (This latter group, however, did get vaccinated when their place of employment mandated it – they were still afraid, but did it. The first group, when asked about it, said that they would find other work.) See? I’m starting to grok these people, and in doing so, grok the pandemic.

The word *grok* makes me think of another word I have always liked: *grex*. *Grex* is a noun (unlike the verb, *grok*). A *grex* is the slug-like creature (sometimes called a slug) that forms when single cells of the protist *Dictyostelium* are faced with starvation conditions. The *grex* is multicellular and motile, and eventually differentiates to form a fruiting body with a stalk and a sorus (from which spores are

released). So, what I am beginning to grok is that the very confident vaccine deniers, faced with information starvation, have formed cohesive *grex* (I looked it up, and the plural of *grex* is *grex*). Apparently, one such *grex* plans to migrate to a small town in South Dakota (this *grex* moves via two-wheeled motor vehicles). There, the *grex* will sporulate and disperse around the country, taking the Delta variant with it. I grok this.

Many, many other *grex* are forming throughout my country, as unvaccinated schoolchildren are heading back to schools. I worry, very much, about these *grex*. But I also grok: kids need education and social interaction. The problem is that serious pediatric cases of the TP are rising catastrophically even before school begins. Will their parents go beyond understanding how dire this is, and begin to actually grok the danger? Or must we wait for more hospitalizations, serious chronic illness and death among our kids? (I so hope not.)

There is another *grex*, one that we need to form. A massive *grex* committed to stopping the pandemic, with all the tools at our disposal. But many of us, including me, live in societies where individuals are left to their own devices to secure a stable life. So, it is not surprising that when asked to do something, like getting vaccinated, it is seen as a personal choice, despite the fact that it affects society as a whole. I honestly do not want hospitalizations among schoolchildren to be the trigger that finally pushes their vaccine-denying (often mask-denying) parents and relatives to change their minds and demand that officials keep our children safe. To form the *grex* we need all of us together – the confident, the terrified, and everyone else. I hope this is our future, this *grex*, however it might come to be. I wish we could all simply agree to do what we can to help the weakest among us, but I suspect it will take further catastrophes before that occurs. I feel like a stranger in this strange land.

Grok?