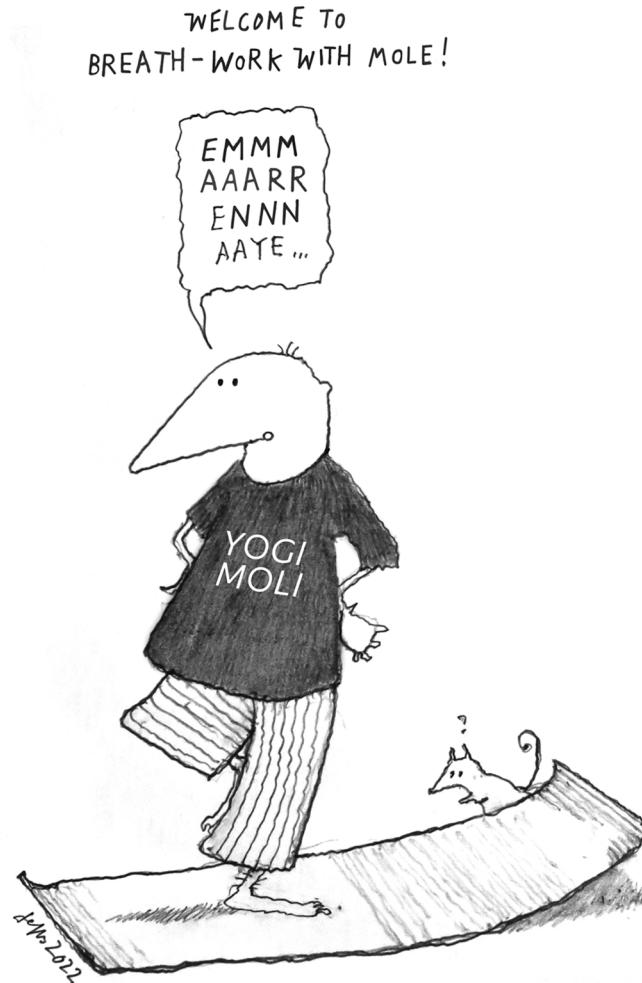


## STICKY WICKET

## Corona XLIX – take a breath

Mole

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

Gasp. It's hard to keep up. By the time you read this, anything I say may be completely irrelevant. In my present (your past), and in my country (the one that just won the gold medals in both the men's single figure skating event and the women's halfpipe), the rates of Omicron infection are plummeting, and governors in many states are removing the mask mandates (I mean, those states where governors actually care enough about the health of their constituents to have mandated masks). This is all despite the spread of Omicron variants with scary mutations (like BA.2 and BA.3), and who knows if something worse is just around the corner. But I have to say, it's good to take a breath.

Okay, yes, I am watching the Winter Olympics (like I say, it is my present, your past). The athletes are just incredible. The snowboarders throw down (I thought they shred, but clearly I am not up on the parlance), the aerial skiers fly, the figure skaters can gyrate so fast that they bend space and distort time (okay, to a very small extent), and the biathlon skiers shoot guns (awesome win, France!). It is amazing to watch. And I catch myself thinking "oh that wasn't

very good" when athletes who are far out of the running for a medal do things that I could not even contemplate doing. (This applies not only to the Winter Olympics; honestly, I could not compete in any sport with anything resembling competence. I promise, you would beat me in a thumb-wrestling contest.)

The Terrible Pandemic tried very hard to ruin the Games, eliminating many competitors for whom going to the Olympics was the crowning achievement of their lives. Heartbreaking. But this is life now. Dashed hopes, seemingly unlimited challenges, frustration and anger. It's good to take a breath.

Meanwhile, lab life is opening up. We have a few papers in revision (going nicely, thank you), and are looking to the future. Making plans for the next set of explorations and pushing the boundaries. You know, discovering stuff. We continue to wear masks at work (and really, everywhere we go in public), and I suspect we will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, but it isn't a big deal. But we are starting to have in-person meetings, and my calendar is becoming daunting as postponed symposia are

rescheduled. Students are (safely) populating our classrooms. Days are getting warmer. Do I dare to hope for a bright future? Do I dare to eat a peach? I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each (sorry, my stream of consciousness drove me into The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. I'll stop. In the room the women come and go. Talking of Michelangelo. Okay, now I'll stop).

Of course, we are not out of this. We may never be. Vaccine misinformation, confusion, denial and lies are rampant. The virus is endemic (I don't know if this is official, but at least likely) and continues to adapt. Meanwhile, there are some good (or at least funny) developments. Recently, I became aware of a meme that, unlike many, seems to be true. A savvy poster (i.e. one who posts) put up a query that received lots of fierce anti-vax response. It went something like this, although the list is mine: "Which of these would you want to put in your body: mRNA, 5-caffeoylquinic acid, p-coumaroylquinic acid, procyanidins, flavonols, dihydrochalcones, anthocyanins, heptadecanoic acid, ethyl palmitate, hexadecane, nonacosane, (Z)-9-octadecenamide, heneicosanal, ursolic acid?" The answer, of course, was "none of these!" followed by outrage about vaccine ingredients. Whereupon it was pointed out that this is not a list of vaccine components, but instead what can be found in apples. Made me smile and take a breath of fresh air.

Here's the thing. As life begins to emerge from this long, dark winter, the pressures that we have forgotten will mount. We will fret about getting scooped, complain about surly reviewers, worry about our grants, strive for promotion, argue about data interpretation, snipe at colleagues who encroach on our research, and worry about disparate data points and bad immunoblots. In short, we will replace

our COVID stress with work stress. Of course we will. But before all that happens, before we retreat to the cold, hard realities of this thing we do, this biomedical research thing (I am assuming that this is what you do. Maybe not. Maybe you are reading this because it was on your sister's laptop. I shouldn't assume), before we descend into despair, please: Take. A. Breath.

Don't get me wrong, I know that there is still a great deal to do. There are many countries that remain in urgent need of vaccines, treatments and hospital facilities. There are still major challenges. But these are things that we know how to do, providing we can muster and sustain the will. I am not advocating turning our backs on these very real problems. But we can keep insisting that these issues be addressed while looking forward to the spring.

It could be that by the time you are reading this, we have an urgent need for new vaccines and therapeutics everywhere. It could be that you are thinking, "nice dream, Mole, but you couldn't have known about the devastation wrought by BA.4" (in my timeline, there is no BA.4 yet, unless I've missed it). But for now, I'm going to enjoy the sunshine. And hey, I still get to watch the Olympics, because, you know, I'm in the past. Don't tell me what happens.

But if, by chance, things are looking even brighter where (when) you are than they are now, congratulations. Take your lab mates out for lunch. Go for a walk in the sunshine. Stay safe but take a moment to enjoy this. We have been slowly moving through the worst pandemic of our lives (okay, we are not out of it, but maybe we get a respite for a while). Spring is coming. Don't be in too much of a hurry to plunge back into 'normal,' whatever 'normal' ever was. It just might be time to take a breath.