

## STICKY WICKET

# Corona XV – there is no spoon

Mole



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

Spoon boy: Do not try and bend the spoon. That's impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth.

Neo: What truth?

Spoon boy: There is no spoon.

Neo: There is no spoon?

Spoon boy: Then you'll see, that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself.

Hey there. No, no exclamation point today, despite it being a nice day. But I'm pretty down, what with the exploding cases of the Terrible Pandemic (TP) in my country, increasingly positive testing rates, increasing hospitalizations, and an increasingly bizarre response from my government. For those of you not experiencing such things in your country, a hardy 'well done!' (*There's my exclamation point, I knew I had one around here somewhere*). And

well done, some of the states in my country (but not you, Texas, Florida, and Arizona). By the time you are reading this, I hope things are better, but I'm not counting on it.

All of which put me in mind of one of my favorite movies, *The Matrix*. You know the one, where everyone is living in a computer-generated virtual reality, except for a few freedom fighters, who have to eat yeast mash and never seem to shower. And where Cypher, in a speech he makes around a huge bite of virtual steak, says "Ignorance is bliss." I feel as though I am surrounded by such willful ignorance. (I know that I'm not, as I know many people who are taking this seriously, but there are still far too many who do not).

I've been trying to understand this deadly denial that appears to be a rather *American* thing. This is not the denial that comes with the early stages of any pandemic, as when smallpox appeared in 189 A.D. in the Roman Empire. One local prefect decided that the remarkable death toll

was due to a poisoned barrel of wine, while another blamed the god, Jupiter. As Camus noted, “A pestilence isn’t a thing made to man’s measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away.” But this is different. We have taken the measure of this pandemic, and continue to do so every day. And we have watched as other countries have shown us how to manage it. No, this is a persistent, determined denial, that eschews all logic and, yes, science. And we seem to be up to our necks in stupid.

I thought that there might be some hints in the flu epidemic of 1918, the so-called ‘Spanish Flu,’ although it was only called that because, unlike the countries at war, neutral Spain communicated the casualties. Actually, the first recorded cases were in an army base in Kansas in March of 1918. By the end of 1919 it had infected about a third of the world’s population and killed 50 million people. During the first wave of infection, governments and media disparaged it, denying its spread, and the Illustrated London News asserted that it was “so mild as to show that the original virus is becoming attenuated by frequent transmission.” The chief medical officer of the British Local Government Board, Sir Arthur Newsholme, announced that it was unpatriotic to display any concern about the pandemic. When the deadlier second wave hit, governments on both sides suppressed any news of the continuing outbreaks and deaths, and newspapers refused to print increasingly distraught letters from doctors.

Maybe this is all understandable; a pandemic in wartime can spell doom for ‘our side,’ as morale collapses and priorities shift. General Erich Ludendorff of Germany, seeing infection among his soldiers, declared “Oh my God, this is the end of the war,” but he kept silent in fear that the French would attack his army. But, none of this seems helpful in understanding what is going on here, now, with the TP and its outspoken deniers in my country.

An extremely interesting article, written by James Wyatt Woodall in ‘Social History of American Public Health’ might be more enlightening. In his ‘The essential denial of pellagra in the New South’ he tells the story of an epidemic disease in the early decades of the 20th century. Pellagra results in diarrhea, dermatitis, dementia, and death, if untreated, within four to five years. It is caused by a deficiency in niacin, resulting from a dietary lack of niacin or tryptophan (from which it can be produced). In 1921, Dr. Joseph Goldberger, a public health officer, noted that there were over 100,000 cases of pellagra across the cotton farms and textile mill villages of the southern U.S., prompting President Warren G. Harding to alert the Surgeon-General and the chairman of the

American Red Cross and demand action, in letters he published in The New York Times.

The response was swift. Southern politicians and businessmen, with the help of arch conservative doctors (such as the president of the Southern Medical Association, Seale Harris) denied any accusations of pellagra and the poverty that caused it. And indeed, it was poverty. A mill worker made on average \$12.77 a week, of which \$11.33 was needed to properly feed a family of five (if the company store even carried nutritious food). Further, small farm owners were bound to the ‘crop lien’ system, in which they were required to plant a single crop, cotton if a loan was required (which it always was, as the farmer was charged interests of 100%). The staple of the diet was corn, imported from the Midwest, and prepared in such a way that no niacin was available. This was grits, which is still widely eaten in the American south. (In contrast, Native Americans prepared corn using alkali, a process called nixtamalization, which made the niacin obtainable, and did not suffer from pellagra even when corn was the major dietary staple). In short, pellagra was an indictment of the southern socioeconomic system, which enriched businesses (and by extension, politicians) and to admit to it was to admit to their shame. As Upton Sinclair said, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” Denial of the disease, and the existing socioeconomic system, was a point of Southern pride.

So, maybe this is what it is all about, this denial of the TP and the response we require to bring it to heel. Shame. Ashamed that, of all the countries in the world, the U.S. catastrophically failed, as a country, to respond appropriately to the virus. To admit it is to indict the political system that allowed this to happen. Instead, deny the virus and its toll, deny the benefits of control measures (we took, and then discarded), and make our denial a badge of allegiance to that failed government.

“There is no spoon.” In Neo’s world of The Matrix, it was all in the mind. But in the reality in which I live, work, isolate, and scream at the televised nonsense spouted by our ‘leaders’ (‘Slow down the testing, slow it down’) it is all like a bad dream. Camus had more to add to the bad dream that will pass away: “But it doesn’t always pass away, and from one bad dream to another, it is [people] who pass away... stupidity has a knack of getting its way.” Or, as Forest Gump famously pointed out, “Stupid is as stupid does.” Camus or Forest Gump, take your pick.

I’ll be back. With exclamation points!!!