

State of the Planet



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A Conversation With a Coronavirus

BY ROBERT POLLACK | APRIL 27, 2020

Sitting at home in self-isolation for the past month, and having no idea as to what the next months would bring, I decided it was time to admit my ignorance, and ask a COVID-19 virus if it would be kind enough to let me know what its plans were. The virus, apparently silent until then because no one had yet asked, gave me an unexpectedly clear answer. I did not have the wit to record it at the time, but here is what I remember of what the virus said to me.

Dear person,

Thanks for asking. I cannot believe my good fortune. Like any other virus, I need to grow in the cells of a creature big enough to see. My closest relatives have all struggled to find a bat or a rodent to grow in, but humans are a species that has grown to be about 100,000 times more numerous than any other mammal your size. (You probably take it for granted that because your genome is a million times larger than mine, you have some sort of right to take over the planet we share. You can explain that to me later.)



Image by Amy Pollack, illustrator of the book *Course of Nature* by Amy and

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one host to another than any other virus like me, since my line began so many million years ago. Knowing this even though I am so small, I assumed your species would know it as well. So what is wrong with us, that we cannot get any respect from your species?

When my ancestors got started in your species a few months ago, in China, I thought you would all band together, all seven billion of you, to begin to find ways to stop me and my progeny from ferreting out every last one of you. If you had done that early enough, then in our simple way, my descendants would have had to take the chance of throwing off new versions of our genome that could escape your testing, your vaccines, and your therapeutics, or we would have no other way to survive but to go back into the rest of nature and try for another species to infect.

We have been ready for that for months. We have made good use of our inherited ability to grow in some of you without causing your body to react at all. We are small but proud, and we cannot fathom how it can be, that you continue to allow us to spread so easily this way, not giving yourselves any way to even know who is carrying us around and spreading us to other humans. Do you care so little about our ability to end your lives? It seems that way. Or, it occurs to me, perhaps you do not realize at all that you are all part of one species?

I do hope you can explain yourselves to us, because my relatives tell me they have never seen such self-destructive behavior in any other species they have lived in. When it comes to the happiness of me and my relatives who make up your pandemic, we cannot thank you enough. We would have thought by now that the same imagination and intelligence that had given your species such mastery over nature would give you the insight that to us, any human will do.

So once again, thank you for your unexpected refusal to do more to fight us than simply keeping from contacting each other. We all know, and so do you, that without therapeutics and vaccines, your species will never simply wait us out in **social isolation**. You are too social, too big, and too smart for that. So we do not mind waiting you out.

One last question: Can you explain to me how your species managed to forget the Manhattan Project? We cannot take any credit for that.

Robert Pollack has been a professor of biological sciences at Columbia University since 1978; he lives in Morningside Heights in social isolation with his wife Amy, an artist.



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Malvia

3 years ago

I like the article. It is very inspiring for all of us... Thank you for this... I hope you like this animation video too <http://tiny.cc/CoronaMonstr>

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amy

3 years ago

i never saw it explained so simply. Kudos to you.I look forward to reading more.

Reply



Sven EnglundPro

3 years ago

Hello Dr Pollack,
In 1975 or 1976 I took a class with about 10 students that you taught at SUNY Stony Brook. I think it was called the Study of the Molecular Structure of Viruses.
I read your article on a conversation with a corona virus. It is an interesting blog about our humanity. Does the reference to the Manhattan Project mean that we have not currently made enough of an effort to solve the virus pandemic or is there

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