

NEWS YOU DIDN'T KNOW YOU NEEDED

Carla Cotropia



ARE VIRUSES ALIVE?

I don't want anyone getting anxiety reading this blog about viruses. Here goes: I found myself wondering, after cussing them, about viruses. Why are viruses so hell-bent to spread as much as possible? So it was with interest that I read the article, "The Secret Life of a Coronavirus" by Carl Zimmer. Are viruses alive? Are chills going down your back thinking about this?

Zimmer writes scientists have debated the question of whether a virus is alive for the last century. For thousands of years, the only thing people knew of viruses was through the diseases viruses caused.

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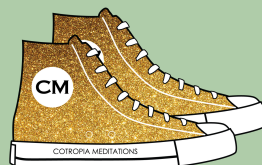
BLOG - ANOTHER CRIME STORY



Viruses are so small that 10 trillion of them weigh less than a raindrop. Because they are so small, they weren't discovered/seen until the 1930s when electron microscopes were invented and powerful enough to allow the virus to be brought into focus and be seen.

In 1935 a scientist named Wendell Stanley extracted the Tobacco Mosaic Virus, a virus that attacks tobacco plants. He dried the virus down to crystals which he then stored in jars like table salt. Months later he doused the crystals with water, and bingo the virus changed from crystals back to its original form, ready and able to once again infect tobacco plants just like before. When Stanley released this discovery to the world, the New York Times wrote "Enough is known about matter; organized and unorganized, to assure us that there may be things 'twixt heaven and earth which are not so alive as an eel or so dead as a rock. In light of Dr. Stanley's discovery the old distinction between death and life loses some of its validity."

While Stanley was drying viruses into crystals, a Princeton biologist named John Gowen started blasting viruses with X-Rays. Scientists had learned that a narrow beam of radiation would alter genes. Gowen discovered X-rays could

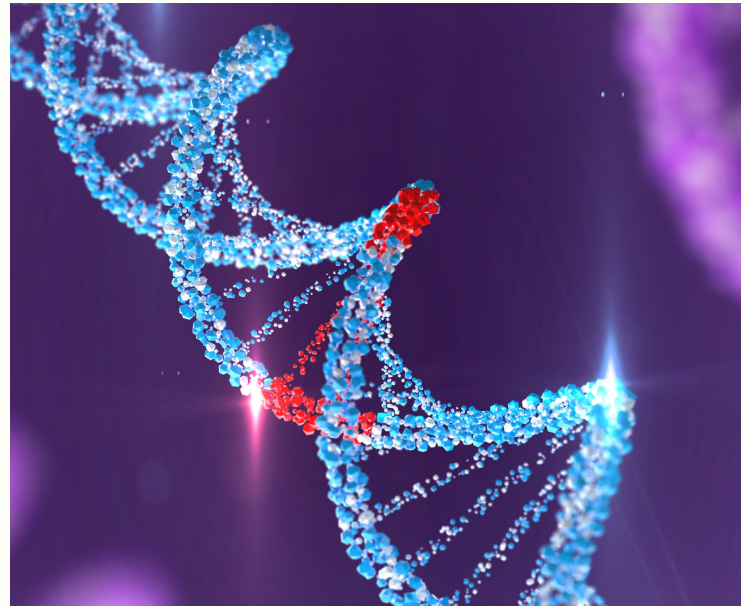


SETTLING CASES TWO SNEAKERS AT A TIME

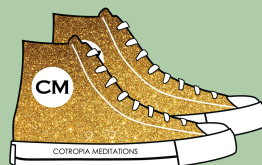
alter the Tobacco Mosaic Virus which led to the conclusion that viruses had genes which OOPS is just like us.

The next step in looking at the “Are they alive question” involved the gene component. In the 1940s, scientists found evidence humans had genes, which are made of double-stranded DNA.

To unlock the information encoded in a gene, a cell makes a matching version from a molecule called RNA. Then it reads the RNA to produce a protein. Because scientists learned viruses had genes and they knew viruses could mutate they now knew viruses, just like humans, have genes that can mutate.



Because genes mutate; they can evolve. Human genes mutate which is what Darwinism is, survival of the fittest, so to speak. BAD NEWS because viruses can to! And sadly viruses are much more efficient at mutating than we are. Humans carry 20,000 protein-coding genes but SARS-CoV-2 has 29. Other viruses have fewer. Fewer genes makes replication and mutation quicker and easier.



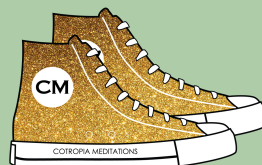
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A virus doesn't have a brain, doesn't eat or poop, so is it alive? Even though it doesn't have a brain, viruses are pretty savvy. For example when a virus invades one of our cells, it scrambles our DNA and coding and the code gets rewired. The cell dies or quits doing what it is supposed to do and now it has one single focus goal, which is "to replicate as much and as fast as possible".

Viruses multiply not by eating, growing, or even reproducing. They simply invade cells and forced our cells to do all the work of making new viruses. But are they alive? In 1992 NASA sponsored a think tank of scientists that met to ponder whether there was the possibility of life on other planets. They quickly realized the first question was "What is Life?" This morphed into the "Are viruses alive?" question. The scientists finally came up with, "Life is a self-sustained chemical system capable of undergoing Darwinian evolution."

Viruses have DNA, they mutate and they produce more viruses. Some scientist argued the definition of Life was wrong, because a single rabbit can't reproduce by itself, like a virus can, and we know rabbits are alive. So under that definition, viruses are alive and rabbits aren't. In the end, it is all a debate and I know what I want the answer to be. HELL NO viruses are not alive. My anxiety level is already up just writing this blog.

I leave you with this tidbit of information, The word virus comes from the Latin word for poison. Apply named!



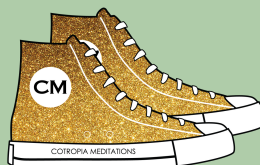
SETTLING CASES TWO SNEAKERS AT A TIME

BAD DENTAL EXPERIENCES AND MY VIEW ON WHITE TEETH

Are you are thinking, “Wow Carla is weird, bored, or has run out of ideas if she is writing a blog on teeth and the dentist” and maybe you would be right. But no, you are not right because I have a lot to say about teeth and dentists and it all goes back to my childhood. My childhood claim-to-fame that was reported in the local paper, the Hearne Democrat, involved a tooth. I got my first tooth at an abnormally early age which in hindsight may explain a lot about my mouth, fondness for chewing, and my weak teeth, but maybe not.



I still remember when I lost my first tooth which is a very big deal for a kid. I was eating mashed potatoes and swallowed it. To this day I don't like mashed potatoes. Swallowing that tooth was an omen about the trouble my teeth were going to bring me, not to mention it was disastrous because the tooth fairy doesn't bring you anything if you don't have a tooth to put under your pillow.



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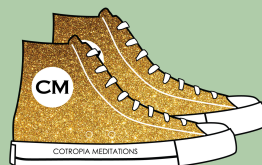
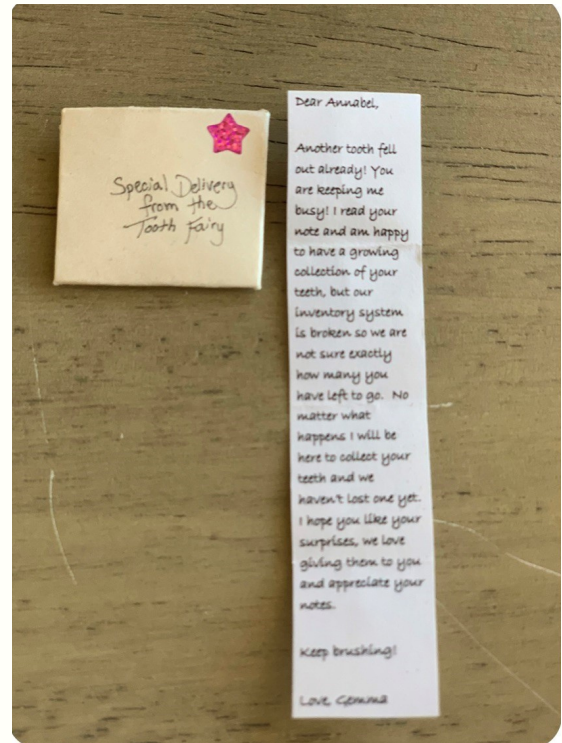
My sister Kimla takes all things magical very seriously for her three young children. Her kids have a tooth fairy that leaves them a gold leafed one dollar bill or a one dollar bill sprinkled with glitter, and additionally, a note complimenting them on brushing or pointing out a lag on that action.

Each kid has their own tooth fairy.

Amelie's tooth fairy is named Sprinkles, Andrew's is Spike and Annabel's is Gemma. Not sure how those names were derived but it does make the experience very personal.

I had a big –(probably should say gigantic)- sweet tooth as a teenager and was obsessed with chewing that pink super sweet bubble gum called Double Bubble, to the point of putting several pieces in my mouth at a time.

Double Bubble is big -not a little chicklet by any means-so two in your mouth at the same time meant my mouth was big even in those days. I kept this up, practicing blowing bigger and bigger bubbles. The end result of all this gum chewing was I had cavities.

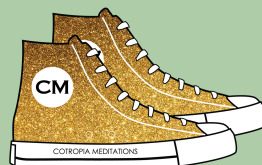


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These cavities resulted in a very negative experience with the dentist in the neighboring town of Calvert Texas, population 1,328 , who unfortunately was a quack. Dr. Quack had ancient drills and a sadistic desire to drill as much as possible. To make matters worse, Dr. Quack had a farm and my parents had a liquid fertilizer business so he came up with the great idea of doing a trade.

The deal was Dr. Quack would work on Carla's mouth in exchange for fertilizer. Holy Shit!!!!I was a teenager with zero power.I tried to point out to my parents the negative impact of this arrangement on my teeth and mouth to no avail.Even tears didn't work. Then it happened. Dr. Quack took the syringe to deaden my mouth and the syringe needle went all the way through my cheek! I had blood on the outside of my cheek as proof. But my mother is tough and she poo poed it away. I guess this was all a design plan to make me resistance to pain since I would three years later water ski into a pier.

But back to teeth and dentists. Once I got on my own with my own money, I found a good dentist in Galveston, Dr. Richard Krumholz. Only problem there was I admitted to him the trade out situation with the fertilizer and he found that irresistibly funny. But he had pity on me so I got laughing gas when he worked on the problems Dr. Quack caused.

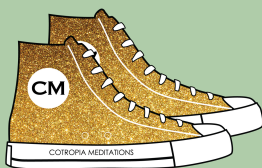
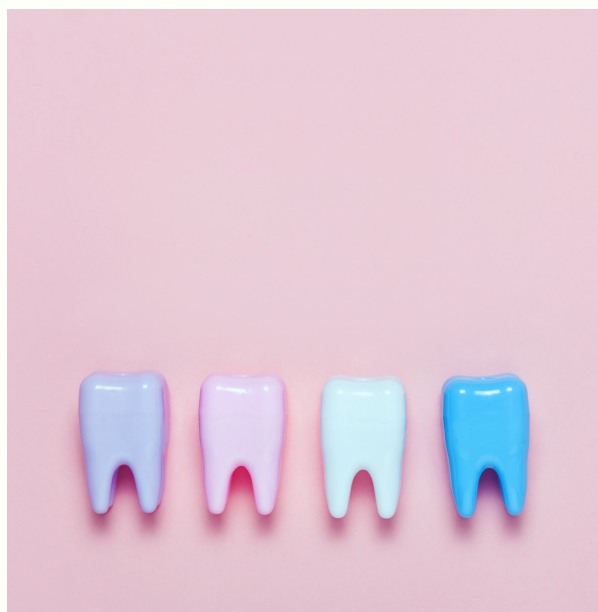


SETTLING CASES TWO SNEAKERS AT A TIME

I was in my office one day when one of my law partners came in carrying a large black garbage bag all puffed out like a balloon. He had just returned from seeing Dr. Krumholz and Dr. Krumholz was sending me a present. The present was a large garbage bag filled with laughing gas, hence why it was puffed out. I acted nonchalant about it but got the partner out of my office as quick as possible, shut the door and began inhaling the gas from that bag. Unfortunately I didn't succeed in getting much but as I recall it did make the rest of the law day a little better.

I saw Dr. Krumholz the entire time I lived in Galveston and he was great. He told me once I was the only patient, he had that wanted a cap on a wisdom tooth rather than pulling it. My philosophy was to keep my teeth in my head. Period. Any tooth is a good tooth.

Which now brings me to the present obsession with bleaching or whitening teeth. Yes, I get it. White teeth look better than brown ones. But am I going to stop drinking coffee or red wine. Hell no. Am I going to try to bleach my teeth? Hell no. I don't mind if you want to, but as far as I am concerned as long as I have teeth, they can be whatever color they want to be.

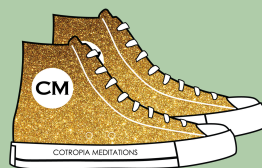


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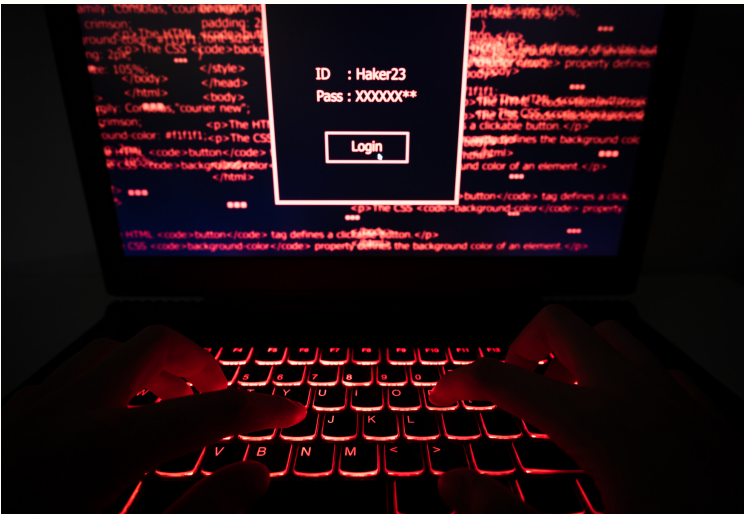
ANOTHER CRIME STORY

I have a fascination with sophisticated crime capers so as a result the case of Ross Ulbricht caught my attention. Ulbricht was born in Austin Texas. As a youngster, he was bright and law abiding, even becoming an Eagle Scout. Ulbricht received a bachelor's degree in physics and a master's degree in materials science and engineering. You would have thought with his brain power, Ulbricht's life would have been off to a great start. Unfortunately he took a fork in the road when he became interested in libertarian economics. What is libertarian economics? It is a belief that people should be free from government control and oppose economic and political systems, believing in a totally free market.

Ulbricht came up with the idea for a website “where people could buy anything anonymously, with no trail whatsoever that could lead back to them.” From this light bulb moment, he was on a mission. Ulbricht called his idea “Silk Road” from the ancient trade routes connecting the East and West which were called the Silk Road. Ulbricht's Silk Road was entirely different. Using his good brain for the wrong purpose, his Silk Road website was on the Dark Web and operated like eBay only illegally and anonymously. In case you don't know what the Dark



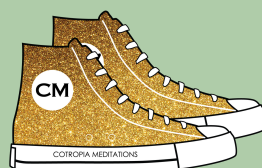
SETTLING CASES TWO SNEAKERS AT A TIME



Web is, it is a computer network where private computers communicate and conduct business anonymously without divulging identifying information, such as a user's location. As a result it is a great place-if that is the right word-to conduct crime, i.e. the name Dark Web.

Ulbricht set up Silk Road in January 2011 using a system called Tor. Tor relays encrypted computer messages from the buyers and sellers through at least six separate computer servers to disguise its users. Ulbricht had these servers hidden around the world, in places including Latvia and Romania. (In researching this blog, I googled Tor-and hope, not trying to be paranoid, it didn't red flag me to the FBI.)

Because Tor routes the internet through various servers it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the original owner or the buyer or seller in this case. Next Ulbricht used bitcoin, the cryptocurrency because again this is a way to achieve anonymity. (In a side note Ulbricht's site brought bitcoin into everyday awareness, even if most of us don't understand exactly what it is or wonder if we were stupid not to buy any when it was cheap).



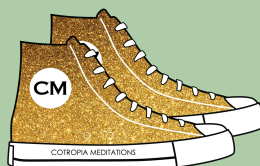
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Silk Road became the go-to place to buy and sell drugs, especially in large quantities. The Silk Road website (I never saw it, I promise you) had a customer-friendly storefront that displayed bricks of cocaine. It became the cyber underworld's largest black market, with \$1.2 billion in sales and nearly a million customers. Beyond illegal drugs, the site served as a bazaar for fake passports, driver's licenses and other documents, as well as illegal service providers, such as hit men, forgers and computer hackers.

When the FBI brought the site down, and arrested Ulbricht in October 2013, they seized assets of 26,000 bitcoins at the time worth \$4 million dollars. How did the FBI catch him? DEA agents learned of Silk Road within months after it went online. So federal agents began making hundreds of undercover purchases from the site beginning in November 2011 trying to track him down.



Ulbricht goofed up when he instructed some users to reply to his Gmail address. Then the FBI subpoenaed the subscriber records from the Gmail address and got his information and matched a photo of Ulbricht on his LinkedIn page.



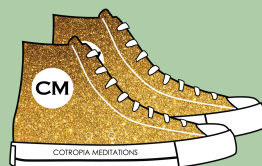
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From there they located Ulbricht in his apartment in San Francisco. This led to the what the FBI does well---The Sting.



An FBI agent went undercover in 2012 posing as a drug dealer and emailed Ulbricht under his cover name of “Dread Pirate Roberts” seeking help finding a buyer for a kilogram of cocaine. Ulbricht had one of his employees help with the cocaine transaction, but this led to a cascade of stupid decisions by Ulbricht including asking for a hit man to kill the employee being fearful he would give up information.

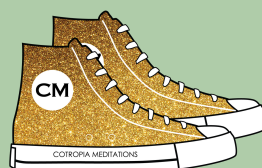
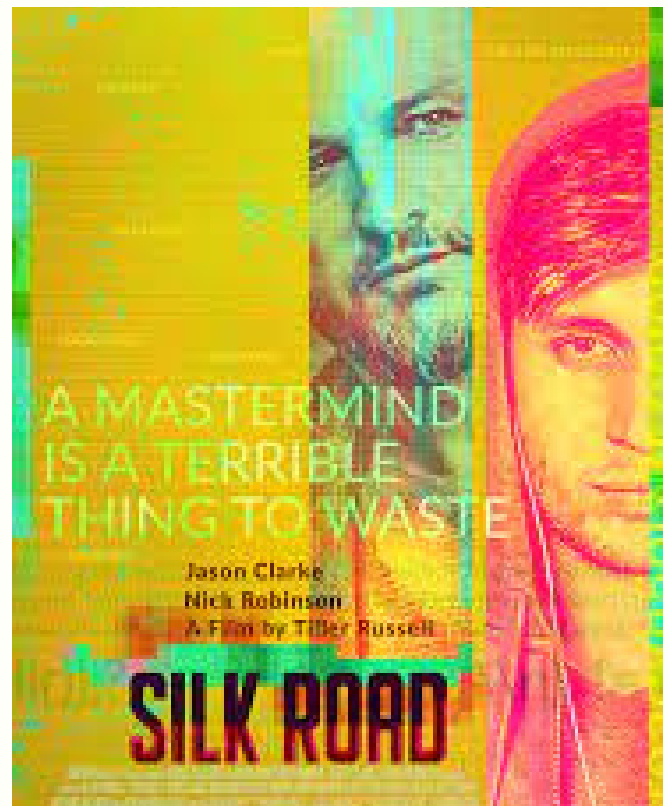
Now the FBI was hot on the trail. The FBI found Ulbricht on his laptop at a San Francisco public library, ironically in the science fiction section. To prevent Ulbricht from encrypting or deleting files on the laptop he was using to run the site, two agents pretended to be quarreling lovers. When they had sufficiently distracted him, a third agent grabbed the laptop and inserted a flash drive which allowed access without having to break his passwords.



SETTLING CASES TWO SNEAKERS AT A TIME

On August 21, 2014, Ulbricht was charged with money laundering, conspiracy to commit computer hacking and conspiracy to traffic narcotics. He wasn't charged with a murder to hire (no murder actually happened) but the attempt was admitted into evidence which may also explain his harsh sentence. He received two life imprisonments plus forty years, without the possibility of parole. When convicted he was 30 years old. Before his jury trial there was an offer of a plea deal which would likely have given him a decade-long sentence but he turned it down. He thought he was smarter than the rest, to add to a string of his many bad mistakes.

A film titled Silk Road, directed by Tiller Russell was recently released on February 19, 2021. Deep Web is a 2015 documentary film chronicling events surrounding Silk Road, bitcoin and the politics of the Dark Web, including Ulbricht's trial. Silk Road-Drugs, Death and the Dark Web is a 2017 documentary covering the FBI operation to track him down and close Silk Road.



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