

A COVID-19 ALLEGORY: IS THAT WHAT YOU ARE REALLY WORRIED ABOUT?

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ABSTRACT

This allegorical poem describes the fears and uncertainties faced by the author in the COVID-19 circuit breaker period, from compliance to health advisories as understanding of the contagion evolved, from conflict of responsibilities to family, patients and teaching, and from managing the CME points requirements of the resilience webinars. Four bonsai compositions of legendary Chinese figurines are used as metaphors for the themes of the webinars.

Key words: COVID-19, Fears, Uncertainties, bonsai compositions

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Is that what you are really worried about?
Those words will forever haunt me
Whenever I walk up Sepoy Lines towards COMB¹
Just where they put up the green barriers
To prevent us from crossing at the junction.

Act 1

I was headed towards College
To join Prof Goh, Prof Cheong and Yew Seng
For the CCC skills course on the 21st of March 2020.²
When I received a phone call from my daughter:
"I am down with fever and now coughing, could it be COVID-19?"

Should I wear a mask during the CCC skills course?³
When the advisory was not to wear when you are not sick?
When the rest of the speakers wouldn't be?
What if I pass it on at the College?
"Daddy, is that what you are really worried about?"

She went to San Francisco and New York in December.
Then Sydney just before Tom Hanks caught COVID-19 there.
Arrived back in Singapore 15 days ago.
Just escaped quarantine imposed the next day
Is that what you are really worried about?

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Okay, you can get mother to fetch you to COMB.
I write a memo to NCID⁴ for you to get tested.
If they will test you.
Or we could be wrong and you end up catching something there instead?
Is that what you are really worried about?

Should have persuaded everyone
That Zoom works best with one person and one device.
Or we risk all the acoustic feedback.
And we could have Zoom-ed in from home (and cut the travelling)
Is that what you are really worried about?

I am one phone call away from MOH⁴
To tell me that a suspect I referred was Covid.
Now we are here together
Keeping a safe distance from one another but not the mike
Is that what you are really worried about?

Then came the chatter in the chat-box
"Can't hear you. Move closer to the mike."
We started passing the mike around.
Will we be another cluster like the SAFRA karaoke?⁵
Is that what you are really worried about?

What if my daughter tested positive?
I'll be on home quarantine.
What about the patients, the clinic and staff?
There are bills to pay.
Is that what you are really worried about?

The next day, I had to refer a febrile patient from New York to NCID.⁶
Came out in the updates as Case 4xx.
Time to deep clean the clinic and collate close contacts.
Time to get interrogated.
Is that what you are really worried about?

Another daughter fell ill with fever two days later.
Caught it from her sister?
Or from her father?
Had to put on full PPE just to enter her room.
Is that what you are really worried about?

Act 2

Now comes the call to help organize webinars
So that doctors can get their CME points.

Prof Cheong suggested this "Resilience" series⁷
It is not scientific. It is woolly woolly.
Is that what you are really worried about?

Our College motto resolved the issue:
Cum Scientia Caritas -
With science and compassion.
We can cover the compassion part of things.
Is that what you are really worried about?

We just started the circuit breaker on 7th April.⁸
Is the iron hot enough to be struck so early?
We had actually planned a scientific webinar on COVID-19 on 29th Feb
But the Academy beat us to it - should we strike now?
Is that what you are really worried about?

Now to set my personal stage for the webinar.⁹
Must look good or distract people away from my face.
Prof Cheong said, "It's like a tele consult -
Can see all your moles and skin tags."
Is that what you are really worried about?

The first session was on "Identifying our Enemies and our Friends".
Since I have nothing much to say,
The usual solution is a gimmick.
My bonsai will share the stage.
Is that what you are really worried about?

The 3 fishermen composition (Figure 1) I call "Kama Sutra"¹⁰
Some will fish for the virtue (or Dharma) of contemplation
Some will fish to earn money for a living (or Artha)
And some will fish for the pleasure of a catch (or Kama as in Kama Sutra)
Is that what you are really worried about?

Your virtue could be gone because you miss a positive case
Or keep sending cases that turn out negative.
Your money could be gone if you have to close the clinic
Or perhaps the pleasure of going to work.
Is that what you are really worried about?

The second session was on "Isolation".
I chose the figurine with one lonely finger pointed to the sky (Figure 2).
And the point I had wanted to make was "One CME point".
In case people complain how come they did not get any.
Is that what you are really worried about?

To obtain one CME point¹¹, you need to pass the IPPT.
Identification. Presence. Participation. Time.
People who logged in for just one minute expect to get one point.
I need to approve the attendance before submitting to SMC.
Is that what you are really worried about?

Then came all those requests -
Received the notice late lah,
Technical problems lah.
All for the one CME point.
Is that what you are really worried about?
The third session was on "Fear".

Wu Song would do the trick. (Figure 3)
The one who killed a tiger with his bare fist (though not really)
Because he was drunk? (though not really)
Is that what you are really worried about?

He was confident no doubt when he entered the forest
Until he saw an official sign that says:
"Beware of tiger. Do not enter".
But pride finally prevailed.
Is that what you are really worried about?

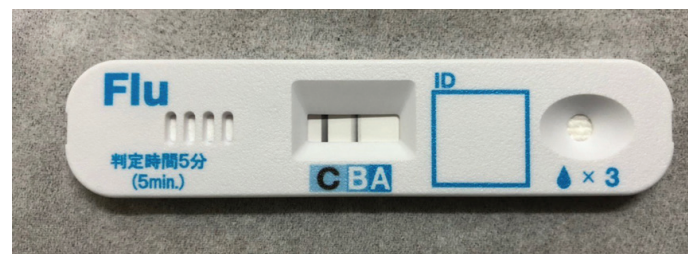
Today is 3rd May, the final session on "Uncertainty".
The gimmick - this long poem¹²
And the bonsai of the stone mason and his daughter sharing the papers. (Figure 4)
The stone mason is holding a bag of opium.
Is that what you are really worried about?

Coolies needed it to ease the pain of their bitter labour.¹³
But it is the young daughter who is reading to her father.
As long as the daughter will have a better life,
He will be satisfied. But will it be enough?
Is that what you are really worried about?

Will anything or everything be ever enough?
Is that what you are really worried about?

Epilogue: ¹⁴

It turned out that both my daughters caught Influenza B.



Could there be a concurrent COVID-19?
It is often the deepest of fears and the greatest of grief
That cannot be spoken (or should not be spoken).
Is that what you are really worried about?

Footnotes by A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean

1. COMB (College of Medicine Building) where the College of Family Physicians (CFPS) office is located. Sepoy line is the name of the road leading to COMB.
2. CCC (Communication, Consultation, Counselling) skills course, compulsory module of the Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine (GDFM) now taught through zoom broadcast from College office.
3. 7th Feb 2020 DORSCON upgraded from yellow to orange to contain community spread of COVID-19. Event organisers are advised to cancel or defer non-essential large-scale event like the GDFM teaching involving 300 doctors. Social distancing and wearing of face mask if sick mandated. The GDFM CCC course for 300 doctors went on-line with the 4 panellists and Secretariat staff physically present in the College office.
4. MOH (Ministry of Health) NCID (National Centre for Infectious Diseases)
5. An early cluster (15th Feb 2020) aroused from a large Karaoke dinner party at SAFRA, where the COVID-19 virus was believed to have spread

through contaminated karaoke microphones being passed around.

6. The author is the principal of a PHPC (Public Health Preparedness Clinic) where suspected COVID-19 patients are referred for screening and testing.

7. A series of four webinars were held one each Sunday night in April 2020 on the themes of fear, social distancing, isolation and uncertainty attended by about 400 doctors each session.

8. Circuit breaker (CB), stay-home for all. Zoom remote conferencing became the way of social communication.

9. The author was in the team that organised the webinars that included A/Profs Cheong Pak Yean, Goh Lee Gan, T Thirumorthy, Drs Tan Yew Seng and Tan Tze Lee.

10. The author has a collection of bonsai with clay figurines from Chinese legends from which he drew lessons of life.

11. CME (Continuing Medical Education) points needed for renewal of registration with the Singapore Medical Council are awarded with conditions of attendance.

12. Multiple at times conflictual streams of consciousness permeate the author's mind – of responsibilities and endearment as father, of professional responsibilities to patients and as a teacher of doctors.

13. 'Coolies' were the manual labourers of early Singapore from China who endured hardship for subsistence wages and used opium to dull the pain of existence.

14. The 'concurrent' contagion feared by the author was metaphorical and expunged by the positive Influenza B test. The deepest fear and the greatest grief allegorically suggested is not personal affliction, profession or even calling.

LEARNING POINTS

- **Doctors may be besieged with multiple conflictual streams of fears and uncertainties in COVID-19 times as physician to patients, as teacher and colleague to other doctors, in fulfilling duty to family and having to continue practice.**
 - **Staying engaged and fully committed to each of the tasks in the present will help guard against being overwhelmed with anticipatory anxiety and inaction.**
 - **Having a philosophical detachment to life, using historical metaphors to represent reality, and at times adopting a whimsical 'don't be so serious' demeanour can calm the waters.**
 - **'Will anything or everything be ever enough? Is that what you are really worried about?' Asking ourselves such rhetorical questions can drown the inner voice hassling us that we are 'Never-Good-Enough'.**
 - **Allegorical verses starkly positing fears and uncertainties are grounded quickly with the rhetorical riposte of 'Is that what you are really worried about?' conveying the resilience of the author in the face of life's vicissitudes.**
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**Figure 1. Webinar Session 1 “Resilience”
(12th April 2020)**



Dharma, Artha and Kama (Virtue, Wealth and Pleasure). The fisherman on the left (Jiang Ziya) is legendary for fishing with a straight hook above the water.

**Figure 2. Webinar Session 2 “Isolation”
– (19th April 2020)**



LONELINESS - expresses the pain of being alone
SOLITUDE- expresses the glory of being alone

**Figure 3. Webinar Session 3 “Fear”
- (26th April 2020)**



The College’s motto to overcoming fear – ‘Cum Scientia Caritas’.
Wu Song the Courageous: He fights best when drunk (Jiuzuiquan) but he doesn’t look drunk here.
He is relying on his “thit sam” or Iron Vest.

**Figure 4. Webinar Session 4 “Uncertainty”
– (3rd May 2020)**



Sharing good news together. Note the opium bag. Interestingly, it is the daughter that is reading to the illiterate father.

A better future for the next generation.