

What I'm Reading (Feb. 7)



By *Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA* — February 7, 2020

Here's what's grabbing our attention this time: Making the perfect cup of coffee ... a scientific basis for the generational transmission of traumatic events ... a book describing the "Forrest Gump" of the early 1800s ... and considering atmospheric gas responsible for an enormous loss of species.



Image courtesy of skeeze on Pixabay [1]

There is something to reading the newspaper in the morning, with a good cup of coffee. I know the newspaper has changed, it no longer is paper, but pixels. And my coffee has moved from the home ground to Keurig, to Nespresso – I apologize for swapping the work of coffee brewing for convenience, but it may be a reflection of my aging taste buds and a palate more tuned to wine than coffee. In any event, brewing a cup of coffee is a chemical extraction, using hot water to get at the coffee “essence” locked in those roasted beans. As with any technique, there is room for improvement. From *The Conversation*, [How to make the perfect cup of coffee – with a little help from science](#) [2]

There is a growing body of research and evidence that our health is determined by aspects of our lifestyle that we have little control over. Where we grow up, our family income, the ability to get around town. There is also increasing evidence that much of our parents' experience as a child, is passed along to us, especially trauma. Work with the children of Holocaust survivors show they are likely to carry their parent's trauma into their own lives. It raises a classic question. Is it nurture,

that these traumatized parents raise their children differently; or it is nature, that genetic changes due to a parent's early life, are passed along? It is time to look at epigenetics. From Medium, [Scientists Are Discovering How Trauma Can Be Inherited](#) [3]

“You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching,” he wrote to his son, “and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family.”

Pretty tough words from father to son, especially when you know that the father was Robert Darwin, and the wastrel son, was Charles. This is just one of the interesting moments in a book I just finished, *The Invention of Nature* Alexander von Humboldt's New World. As is often the case, I am behind the curve in reading this story of von Humboldt, a 19th century, autodidact and Forrest Gump. You will discover von Humboldt's fingerprints throughout the world, from Simon Bolivar, liberator of parts of South American, to first voicing the idea of an ecology, to a man who invented both isotherms and isobars, he even has a current named after him. And did I mention that he was a friend of Goethe, and may well have been part of the inspiration for Faust? The book runs to about 400 pages, but for those who like a good story and for a chance to see a lot of scientific, artistic, and political dots connected this is a great read.

While we are on the subject of books, let me offer up another work by Nick Lane, *Oxygen*. Long before there were any concerns about carbon dioxide accumulating in our atmosphere, the rise of oxygen resulted in catastrophic environmental consequences for anaerobes, a loss of species orders of magnitude greater than the time the Earth got rid of dinosaurs. Whether oxygen is “an elixir or a poison” very much depends on when we are looking and who is doing the viewing. I would not describe Lane's writing style as breezy, it is chock full of scientific nuggets, but it will provide a fascinating look at a chemical that surrounds us and gives us life. Along the way, you will learn why anti-oxidant supplements have no value and why sex is part of the reason we do not live forever. The story will give you a new appreciation of the miracle that has placed us on this planet.

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[2] <https://theconversation.com/how-to-make-the-perfect-cup-of-coffee-with-a-little-help-from-science-129398>

[3] <https://elemental.medium.com/scientists-are-discovering-how-trauma-can-be-inherited-f6bde9430675>