What I'm Reading (Sept. 10)

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — September 10, 2020

The beginner's mind, a video of Tesla production (can you see what is missing?), a video that will put a smile on your face and bring back the joy of opening a present when you were a tween, how will the rise in remote work change our lives, and finally, a question of expertise.

"Take the matter of genetically modified (GM) foods, which are overwhelmingly considered to be safe based on current scientific knowledge. Research has shown that people who hold the strongest anti-GM views, believing that they are harmful, are the most inclined to overestimate their relevant knowledge."

The Japanese have a word, "shoshin," which refers to the beginner's mind, a mind fully open to possibilities without preconceived approaches or beliefs. I have a problem adopting shoshin, and I suspect that we all do, to varying degrees. You might be able to see how far along you are into opening up by whether you read the article to its conclusion. From Psyche, How to foster 'shoshin.'

This week, I ran across two videos; they are both short and well worth the few moments. First up,
"By version 3, it won’t look like anything else. You can’t have people in the production line itself, otherwise you drop to people speed. So there will be no people in production process itself. People will maintain the machines, upgrade them, and deal with anomalies."

The words of Elon Musk describing how Tesla’s will be made; the video [3] shows how the production line now looks. Robotic production has its appeal, certainly in lower prices and more efficient production, but Musk’s comment about people’s speed is, at least, to me concerning. It has so many more implications. And the dreadnaught analogy he makes in a Star Wars allusion is not helpful either.

One of my great joys as a child was my three-panel Chemcraft Chemistry Set. So much to learn, how to pronounce, and spell Phenolphthalein, how to make clear liquid pink, how to make gunpowder. But the other day, I ran across a science set that I never had. However, I might still yearn for “the Gilbert U-238 Atomic Energy Lab Kit, which included three sources of radiation and four uranium ores that are also radioactive.” From Atlas Obscura, three minutes of the joy and lunacy of a science set from 1950, The Most Dangerous Toy in the World [4]

And then two articles on how COVID-19 effects ripple on, well past the end of the pandemic, whenever that arrives.

"AGI [artificial general intelligence] isn’t coming in the next thirty years. Neither are Moon or Mars colonies, or starships. Or immortality. Or nano-assemblers or ems. Cities won’t be flooded due to CO2, a nuclear war won’t devastate civilization, aliens won’t arrive in the skies, and a religious jihad won’t remake culture. The rates of change in the economy, lifespans, fertility, automation, and non-carbon energy will stay about the same. Quantum computing, 3D printing, and crypto-commerce will grow but remain small. There won’t even be that many flying or self-driving cars. So if you are looking for science-fiction-level excitement re dramatic changes over this period, due to a big change we can foresee today, you’ll be disappointed.

Unless maybe you look at remote work."

How will remote work change our lives, globally and locally? From the blog Overcomingbias, Our Brave New Merged World [5]

COVID-19 has raised questions about expertise and the limits of our knowledge, although those questions have been around for many years. But our military has now released footage of unidentified flying objects from multiple sightings, and we are awash in information and disinformation.

"Experts are people we have determined worthy of thinking for us on some particular topic. First, we run a value check for outwardly-facing core beliefs. Does this expert seem to care about the same things I care about? Then, we run a social check. Would our friends trust this person? Would our friends accept our trusting this person? Finally, we check for authority — credentials, associations, and does this person just sound smart? We listen for a certain kind of language that evokes authority. We look for a certain kind of tone, pace, and confidence. Then, when all our boxes are checked, we open up and let the experts in. On the topic of UFOs, we have often turned to "serious scientists" for understanding, which is our euphemism here for debunking. But "serious scientist" is not a
profession, it's a popular identity, and that identity is a plague on knowledge. Why qualify the word "scientist" at all? Presumably one is either doing science, or one is not. One is either a scientist, or one is not. The word "serious" divides inquiry into classes. The prestigious, and popular, is separated from the low, the weird, the socially unacceptable. In this way "serious science" is just a Cerberus that guards consensus reality, and on the question of consensus science is agnostic. Any qualification of the word "science" negates the method, and "serious scientists" are therefore not scientists at all. But who else to turn to?"

A blog post from a hedge-fund guy, interested in tech and space, Fire in the Sky [6]