

RESERVOIR // SPOON THEORY & CLIMATE CRISIS

A natural or artificial lake created using a dam

CC:

There's a term in cycling that they call "burning matches."

You only have a limited number of matches to burn in a race—and you have to decide when to burn them and when to keep them.

And I was like, "Oh, that's spoon theory!"

JWB:

Spoon theory is about recognizing limited resources.

Spoon theory helps make sense of the fact that energy is not infinite.

CC:

So I understand spoon theory as an idea created by Christine Miserandino, who is a person with chronic illness who was trying to explain to a friend of hers who was not disabled why it was that she could do some things one day and then the next day couldn't do the same thing. And her friend couldn't quite get her head around why things change so much.

I believe they were at a restaurant at the time and Christine just gathered as many spoons as she could get her hands on. It was like, say twelve spoons. And she said, "Okay, imagine that these twelve spoons are all your energy for one day, and you have to choose how to spend them over the course of a day."

And everything takes spoons. So getting out of bed takes two spoons. Having a shower is going to take three spoons. Going for the bus is going to take three spoons, but getting a taxi will take one spoon. And they tried to work out how on earth she would get through each day with only these twelve spoons.

JWB:

There's a moment in that story when she talks about asking her friend, "How many spoons do you have? You need to know how many spoons you have." I think this is a really powerful moment in the story—also because [of] that idea of knowing and marshaling your resources.

What's a spoon?

How many spoons do you have?

I've heard her talk about how *different* that orientation is: to sort of know that there's a limited amount, and that you have to be really careful and make really good choices about when you use them and when you hold them back. And how *different*

that is than waking up with the assumption that you have an infinite amount of spoons, that they are a kind of endlessly re-creatable resource.

CC:

Spoon theory is so much about energy, but it seems so intricately linked to time.

The understanding and the learning and the expertise and knowing about choosing not to—of holding back, because you can feel the implications, you can feel the repercussions. You know the long term repercussions and damage that will happen if you do this now.

Maybe spoon theory could save the world. [laughter]
Maybe that's what we need!

JWB:

The communities that have really embraced and incubated and developed this intimate understanding of spoon theory [are] folks with chronic illness. I've learned deeply from friends in those communities, how attached I remain to the idea that if I just organize my time and energy properly, I can do it all.

And I think that's a lie.

And I think it's the same lie that gets us into trouble when it comes to climate. That it also feeds the idea that we can have all the things and do all the things. Learning with spoon theory to marshal carefully our resources, and to make better choices about what really matters—arguably it's our failure to do that as a culture that has magnified climate crisis.

CC:

You only have a limited number of matches.
And you have to decide when to burn them and when to keep them.

To Learn More:

To read about **spoon theory**, see “The Spoon Theory” by Christine Miserandino (2003). <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>

To read about **burning matches**, see Rob Wakefield, “Burning Matches.” (2016) <https://www.sportive.com/cycling-training/523375/burning-matches-timing-your-efforts-in-a-bike-race-or-sportive>

Luke Beardon, “Autism and Triathlons, Burning Matches, and Balancing Life.” (2017) https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/autism/2017/07/10/autism-and-triathlons-burning-matches-and-balancing-life/?doing_wp_cron=1623671365.0930640697479248046875