



## ***Director's Corner***

# **Post-Pandemic Life is Precarious, but We Aren't Going Anywhere**

By Adina Kalet, MD, MPH

Twenty years after the fictional Georgia Flu Pandemic, only small bands of humans are left on Earth. How these people survive, adapt, and rebuild is the premise of the magnificent [HBO miniseries](#), *Station Eleven*. The show is based on the award-winning 2014 [novel](#) by Emily St. John Mandel which was written well before our very own non-fictional pandemic.

I read *Station Eleven* in March 2020, on the recommendation of a colleague (Thanks, [Jake Prunuske, MD](#) of MCW-Central Wisconsin!) who had picked it up in an airport bookshop, ironic since a Michigan airport figures prominently in the story. The lessons continue to ring true.

### **When stripped to the essentials, what is a healer?**

Considering the dire setting she created in her novel, St. John Mandel presents a surprisingly poignant and optimistic view of what post-apocalyptic physician education might look like.

In the opening scene—and on the eve of the pandemic which eventually kills almost everyone—Jeevan Chaudry rushes to the stage, the only audience member who helps the actor playing King Lear as he dies of a heart attack. Jeevan is an unlikely medical “hero” and has little to offer. Although his sister is a physician, Jeevan is not a health care professional. He is the *least* successful of his three close-knit siblings, a marginally employed journalist, and prone to panic attacks. Despite his challenges, we watch him rise to harrowing challenge after harrowing challenge.

Jeevan's irrepressible, fiercely protective character propels him to repeatedly commit courageous acts of loving kindness and caring. For instance, on that first night, he locks eyes with eight-year-old actor Kirsten Raymonde as she watches her friend and mentor die. Despite his own fear, indecisiveness, and self-doubt, Jeevan cares for Kirsten, thus ensuring her survival. Their mutually lifesaving connection becomes a critical plot through-line, and their relationship offers a Master Class in medical professional identity formation and character development.

It is only a bit of a spoiler to report that over the ensuing twenty years, Jeevan—despite tremendous ambivalence (and a near-fatal wolf attack which leads to a hilarious plot twist involving a leather clad, motorcycle-driving kidnapper and a department store mattress section with a dozen heavily pregnant women)—becomes a skillful, practically wise healer. In scene near the end of the book, he leaves his family to attend to his patients, including a dying woman, with great tenderness. He has become the iconic “country doctor.”

### **Adapting as our own pandemic arose**

In early March 2020, Bruce Campbell and I met in our Kern Institute offices as everyone was packing up workstations to shelter at home. My friends and family on the East Coast were facing the full force of the novel SARS-CoV-2 virus. The news was frightening. Innovative approaches were rushed into being (see article in today’s issue by Tewksbury, Buckvar-Keltz, Poag and Harnik). Spring conferences, classes, and activities were cancelled. Travel was put on hold. We created our bubbles, worried about our friends and family, and locked down.

Grasping for a meaningful response and hoping to keep our MCW and Kern communities connected, Bruce and I decided to *temporarily* transform the Institute’s quarterly newsletter into a weekly on-line publication. We had no idea if this approach was sustainable, but knew we had to try. We assembled a team of Kern staff, medical students, and faculty, and then begged people to write about their experiences and to share their thoughts. We put the [first issue](#) together on March 20, 2020 and hit “Send.”

Today marks the 103<sup>rd</sup> issue of the *Transformational Times*. We now have a mailing list of over 6000 for each new issue. Each week, we identify topics, explore boundaries, and solicit essays from a wide range of stake holders. It has been very satisfying work and our requests to create pieces are rarely turned down. Much to our delight, we get emails from readers of all sorts, who engage—and occasionally challenge—us about our words and our work.

We have been moved as our authors spoke from their hearts and have felt privileged to provide a means allowing our contributors to find their voices. As the [newsletter archive](#) grew, we reflected on the ephemeral nature of the medium. We hoped to give some of the writing a second life and published a compilation of sixty *Transformational Times* essays, entitled [Character and Caring: A Pandemic Year in Medical Education](#), in December 2021.

### **The pandemic is giving way to other global challenges**

For the first time in two years, COVID-19 is not front page news. Unfortunately, there are new and horrific crises. Against the backdrop of Vladimir Putin’s stultifying aggression in Ukraine, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#)) warned on February 28, 2022 that a delay in global action will result in missing a [“rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all”](#). We cannot afford to take a break.

Even as the current pandemic has left over [six million people dead](#) worldwide, COVID-19 has taught us that that we do have the capability to face big global challenges and learn to adapt. Remember the solidarity, cooperation, and heroism of Spring 2020? At MCW and around the world, we must dig down deep and find the strength to do this again, repeatedly, for the foreseeable future.

All of us must come together to support [sustainable development goals](#) that embrace change, adaptation, and mitigation. It will require unprecedented global cooperation. As we go to press, President Biden has declared increasing sanctions that cut off all purchases of Russian oil and gas. Countries, NGOs, and individuals are responding to the war with financial and logistical support. Americans will pay more for fuel but, perhaps, Ukrainians will benefit. We hope that this leads to an easing of tensions and moves toward climate action, as well.

### **What we might learn from *Station Eleven***

*Station Eleven* is a utopian novel premised on the almost complete destruction of humanity. On the one hand, the post-pandemic situation is horrible. Billions have died. There is a marauding band of murderous, cult-following child soldiers. Most survivors have known tragic loss.

On the other hand, life for the survivors is simpler and more beautiful. A nomadic, rag tag troupe of actors and musicians (including the now-grown Kirsten) travel in horse drawn, previously fossil-fueled vehicles, touring scattered human settlements in the upper Great Lakes region. With great passion and seriousness, they perform Shakespearian plays and classical music.

Despite having been depopulated by the pandemic, the earth rapidly repairs and rejuvenates itself. Highways and high rises are engulfed in flora. Fauna is abundant. Water is clear and clean. The internet dies after only a few weeks, and laptops and cell phones are enshrined in a Museum of Civilization or repurposed as wall art. There are lessons to be learned from this book.

Our own pandemic life has also been instructive. Our team can attest that even small opportunities can produce great bursts of creativity. We work differently, we learn differently, we travel less. We explore contradictions and host meaningful conversations. We lift creative and innovative approaches to support students on their journeys toward being excellent, compassionate healers. We prioritize educational values that will imbed character strengths that will enable physicians to weather whatever comes their way.

We intend to continue supporting innovations that will transform the healthcare workforce, shine a celebratory light on the best of our community, and keep a critical eye on the world in which we find ourselves. At least for now, the *Transformational Times* is here to stay.

*Adina Kalet, MD, MPH, is the Director of the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medical Education and holder of the Stephen and Shelagh Roell Endowed Chair at the Medical College of Wisconsin.*