

## **INTO THE AFTER**

by Lorri Anderson, MS Homeopath, CCH

What I know is that the security outside my door patrols at least as much to keep me in as to keep everyone else out. We're all very nice about it, of course. I'm not sure this newest batch of guards is even conscious of it. I've been here a long time now, more than a year. I enjoy the community and even have some friends. Just yesterday morning, young Susy asked me why I didn't have my own garden when I work in the community garden so often. (And I didn't have the heart to tell her that I would probably be gone before harvest time.) But what I know...

What I know is that the fever was 15 years ago, and none of us have forgotten. Some people call it Sarah Johns (after the woman who is credited as being the first case, though no one really knows who was first.) Others call it the Rolling Rose (because of the way the skin flushed); but most people just call it The Fever. As if it were the only one in history.

In some ways, I suppose it was the only one in history. Nothing has been the same since. It's not really fair of us to blame the fever for all of the changes that happened in its aftermath, but we do. Society just crumbled shockingly quickly. For decades before the fever, experts had predicted the type of consequences we experienced. But almost no one was prepared. And even most who were prepared were stunned at how easily all of the things we had come to count on just ceased to exist. And once those things we counted on had been gone for just a few weeks, we no longer knew how to get them back again.

It was a small thing really, the coming unglued of our world. There were no quarantines, no mad scrambles for a vaccine which would eventually be delivered too little and too late by a military escort. Equally so, there were no bombs, no planetary disasters, no race to a small plot of "safe" real estate – not even so much as the sacking of Rome. We just shut down for a few days. And then we learned we didn't know how to re-start. Fascinating, truly fascinating. (Or it would be if only it didn't make everything so darned difficult.)

It was the logistics of what we considered modern living which sunk us, more than the fever itself. When the fever came people got sick – a lot of people – very sick. Yes, some of them died. Even some of those who saw homeopaths died, although we probably had much higher survival rates than the conventional medical professionals did. But they say that for each person who died of the fever, another five died of the violence and migrations and deprivations which followed the wave of the actual disease.

You should know that's just talk. It's not like anybody took any kind of census or kept good statistics on how many died, let alone how they died or what kind of treatment they may have had before they died. And even if someone had done that kind of epidemiological work, they certainly haven't had any way to publish their results or let the rest of us know.

But I tend to believe the rule of thumb that survivors use today. For every one who died of the fever, five died after; and we lost almost two-thirds of the population before it was finished. Which was, as I said, shockingly quickly.

When the fever came, people got sick. And most of them went home to bed. (Not because they were especially savvy about health, mind you. But the symptoms became so intense, so relatively quickly, that people just went home.) There were some fights in the grocery stores and angry lines at the gas stations in the earliest days; but for a minute, it seemed like that might be the worst of it. And the pundits started congratulating us all for the wisdom of having gone home to bed.

Then someone figured out the trucks had stopped rolling. And someone else was foolish enough to make that a major news story. And that was when the real trouble started. Fights in the stores became full scale riots. The gas stations became shooting galleries or armed standoffs with hostages. But without trucks on the highway, neither groceries nor gas were being replenished. And the original stocks weren't enough for more than a couple of days. In fact, plenty of the gas stations had been accustomed to being re-supplied twice per day.

By the time a few truck drivers had recovered sufficiently to get supplies moving again, the warehouse employees were too afraid of the riots to go to work. And the retailers fell to the combination of no inventory and no security. The wide ranging fear and violence created enough anarchy to knock out the water and/or the power in some key spots on the grid. And once the grid had a couple of holes, those failures started to spread. Destructive chaos swept through the cities. And migrations began in earnest.

Thousands upon thousands of people just took to the streets, convinced the grass would be greener somewhere else. Or simply terrified of their one-time friends and neighbors, desperate to get away, to keep what little they had or to secure any of the much that they needed. The population was moving across the land like a plague of locusts, devouring everything in its path and leaving empty landscape in its wake. Going where? Producing what?

And changing nothing.

I was actually still in the city during the original migrations. Eventually, I would cross those empty landscapes behind that plague of locusts. But when most of them were on the move I was still at home. When I think about that time now, I have no idea why I stayed. How I stayed is another question altogether. I had a garden and a dog.

I also had skills and medicines. Through those, I enjoyed the protection of both my clients and the retailer for whom I worked. I was crazy busy, of course. There was an epidemic. I was a homeopath. And homeopathy had a great track record with epidemics. Maybe people had finally come to know that, or maybe they had just come to know that conventional medicine didn't really have much to offer against the current scourge. Either way, the center where I had been working in the natural health supply store had been a visible supporter of alternatives for decades.

In the early days of the active fever, I settled on a short list of homeopathic remedies which promised to be most helpful. I anticipated there would be problems with supply, and I went to the center to pull the available quantities off of the retail sales floor so that they might be dispensed with some equity and accuracy.

“The Center”, as my non-practice workplace was known, was really just a smallish building with front and back common areas and three discreet businesses. The common areas were shared by a natural health supply store (where I worked part-time), a pharmacy, and an office-share space which was available by the hour or day. The office-share was used primarily by a therapist, a chiropractor and a local herbalist, but anyone could rent it. I had used the space myself from time to time, when my private office wasn’t presentable for one reason or another.

The spectacle that greeted me inside that place remains etched on my brain to this day. The streets had been nearly deserted, and most of the local businesses were closed. This was during the phase when most employees and most customers were home in bed. But when I opened the door to the center, it was jammed with people. A few of my colleagues were trying to perform regular duties. But almost all of the people in the space were sick, and there were so many of them that there was barely room to move.

I stopped in shock. And I stood absolutely still for several minutes, just trying to absorb the new reality in front of me. But before that reality soaked in, I felt myself walking directly to the retail display and pulling all of the tubes of my selected remedies and packing them into my pockets. Next I stepped behind the counter, dispensed a dose or two to the most obvious cases among my colleagues and asked if someone from the staff could help me. They gave me sweet Julia, and I asked her to dissolve the remedy pellets into quantities of water (so that we might extend our supply.)

And then I went to work. Real work. Homeopathy at its best. I started talking to the sick, collecting as little information as possible but all of the information necessary to select the remedy homeopathic to each individual case of the fever. I asked Julia to dispense a single dose as I finished and the client to find a place to wait so that we could observe the reaction to the selected medicine. It went on like that for a very long time. Even now, I’m really not sure how long it was.

Soon enough, one of my colleagues hit upon the brilliance of directing the dosed-for-observation into the center’s education room, which was to become a makeshift clinic. And when Marcy arrived, we worked out a simple system of triage which she (and later Lila) implemented. Before it was over, Marcy would learn basic remedy differentiations and take her place alongside me. At some point, the owner of the store locked the entire homeopathic inventory and dropped the key into my pocket.

He is a sweet man, and I know he meant well. But he never really did understand how homeopathy works. I know he thought that if I had the entire inventory of remedies I would be able to help more people. And over these 15 years, I have. So maybe he understood homeopathy better than I think.

Later, he asked me if I wanted an escort home and back. It wasn’t until then that I realized armed guards had joined us days before. I had sort of noticed their arrival, but not really. The work was consuming. And even though we were doing well against the fever, we lost eight to ten percent of our cases. Before the fever, homeopaths didn’t have fatalities. The world was different, before.

Don't get me wrong. An eight to ten percent fatality rate was twenty or so percent better than the conventional medicos were achieving. The urgent care clinic across the street from the center was said to be losing three out of four cases which walked in its doors. But the people saying that had no way of knowing. And staying on top of the statistics really wasn't anybody's priority. But it is true that one day the doctors across the way went home at closing time and just never came back.

For all I know, those docs met the same fate as me. But I don't think so.

I think that's when the migrations were starting. People had nothing. Every home's last can of okra or odd pack of noodles had been consumed. Most of the stores were standing open, but they had no goods. Violent gangs were crashing through the neighborhoods, claiming the last scraps of food, water or weapons and destroying anything else. I was in Texas, where there was no shortage of guns. And many people defended their castles for quite some length of time.

But when the power and the running water went out, that was the last straw. Even the holdouts started planning a departure. It's odd that those days are rarely discussed now. But when they are, most of wonder where we thought we were going. And why we thought things would be better when we got there.

But things were better in the country; there were wells and outhouses for starters. And there was room to hide or run from the gangs. The cities had become death traps.

The day came when the owner's son stopped to tell me his entire family had survived the fever, and to thank me for my part in that. As he was leaving, he mentioned loudly that I had never had a key to the center; and that was unfortunate. We both laughed because somehow that seemed funny. Then he surreptitiously pressed one into my hand. He gave me a serious look, and I understood that I wouldn't see him again. Likely, I wouldn't see anyone in his family. (I never have.)

That rattled me, knowing they were leaving. And knowing I had a key to the center even though there had just been a very public announcement that I did not. That had been for my protection, and I silently thanked him. I also silently decided to stay – at least until I could make a plan. What a joke that turned out to be.

But that night (and the next and the next) I started carrying home as much of the remaining homeopathic inventory as I could without attracting attention. I even looked for conventional medications like antibiotics and aspirin, but there weren't any. It crossed my mind that I didn't know when those stores had been depleted, probably weeks ago. And then I wondered why the roving marauders had not been more trouble at the store. There had been those security guards and some trouble here and there, but still, it seemed a puzzle.

Over the next two days, I came close to putting that puzzle together. But ultimately, I was too slow of a study.

Shortly after midnight on that third night after I got my key to the center, there was a quiet knock on my door. And I laughed. Before the fever it was an old joke among homeopaths that when the phone rang at midnight, you just needed to pick it up and say, "Arsenicum." That was the name of one of our medicines which was well known for being worse at midnight. We no longer had phones or very many clocks, but I laughed anyway. And I even picked up the tube of Arsenicum as I went to the door.

My dog was going crazy, which probably should have tipped me off. But those were strange days, and she was my real security. She had been working as hard as I had since the fever, ever vigilant, ever fierce. So it threw me into complete confusion when the first thing that happened after I opened the door was that something was thrown over her. But before I could deliver my angry protest, something was thrown over me, too. And then I was thrown over someone's shoulder.

The last piece of that puzzle at the back of my mind finally dropped into place.

As I said, I had been confused. And it still took me a few minutes to sort things out. By that time I had been carried into my driveway and deposited on a high and rough surface which later proved to be a horse-drawn wagon. My upper half was in a pillowcase, and my captors were starting to bind my arms with duct tape. I can still recall the sound of duct tape coming off a roll, though we haven't had duct tape for years. And I said, "Save your tape." It became the start of a speech I have since given more times than I can count.

I finally got it. They were stealing me. My poor dog had been trapped inside in some way because of me.

Of course, it had nothing to do with me personally. The local thugs had left the center relatively unmolested because healing was taking place there. They had left me unmolested because I was part of that. I was a healer; I still had medicines; and the power of homeopathy wasn't a secret any longer. In fact, in the post-fever world, a healer was a commodity just like food or potable water. But much more valuable.

And so I had a glimpse of my fate, understood my opportunity.

My speech, as I have come to think of it, was my negotiation. It has changed some in the intervening years. I like to think I have kept pace with the times. Certainly the details have waxed and waned through scarcity and abundance, urban and rural, east and west, all the variety that our post-apocalyptic existence has to offer. But the fundamentals remain fixed; they will be the same the next time I give it, too.

I said, "I'm fairly useless without those nine books and that bag of medicines. It's all well and good to steal me, I suppose. I'm sure that's what you were asked to do. But I guarantee you that when we get to whatever place you're planning to deliver me and the boss learns I can't do anything without the books and medicines you left behind, you'll go from great to goat in about a heartbeat. And I just don't think any of us really need that. Life is hard enough these days."

Even in my fear, I negotiated fairly well that first time, made some choices which still have impact today. Yes, during my first kidnapping, I convinced my kidnappers to pack my books, my medicines and my dog along with me. Not only that, I got them to take me to the center and stand guard while I packed up the rest of the homeopathic medicines and the handful of other supplies which might become useful. I sometimes wish I had planned better in terms of clothes and so on, but then I remember I didn't plan; I just reacted to the events. Although I may have been slow to grasp the full implications of our changed reality, once I did put the puzzle together, there was no taking it away from me.

So began the current chapter of my life.

And it's a pretty good life by post-fever standards. As long as you can accept the idea that you're a commodity, almost like chattel, it's a pretty good life. Oh, and the kidnappings; you have to make some kind of peace with those, too.

But I travel without walking. I sleep in a good clean bed every night (except when I'm travelling, of course.) I have my pick of top quality food and water. I have a continuing stream of interesting work with a wide variety of clients. I had my dog with me until her time ended of its own accord. And I already mentioned that I have the best security in town – in every town.

Our world since the fever is nothing like I had ever imagined. Like so many who lived through the nuclear age, I've always had an image of what life would be like after 'the big one', Armageddon, apocalypse. And this isn't it. I saw large craters, dark skies, scorched earth, a total ruination of what we used to call infrastructure.

But all that's still here. We have roads, bridges, railways, tall buildings. In a few places there is still electricity, cars, or water. These are pockets, you understand, flukes really. And it's pretty much one to a customer – electricity in one place, cars somewhere else, and so on. But we've got it all. In fact, we're kind of drowning in things: computers, televisions, refrigerators, staplers. We just don't have many of the things that are really important.

Virtually no intact families, no friendships as we knew them, no community, society, law. Private property and healthcare are entirely different. Organized communications no longer exist. No digital or tele-anything. And during the early years, there was very little food, less water. We've finally got some working solutions for food and water again, which has re-started commerce. On the other hand, we've started to run out of shoes.

But the shortage we continue to feel most sharply is more basic. We just don't seem to know how to do anything anymore. All of the electronic information tools are gone, of course; but we still have lots of books. Many of the libraries weren't severely damaged and reopened long ago. They're one of the few legitimate reasons to go into a city. But the libraries aren't heavily used. Beyond the simplest questions about agriculture, sanitation, food preparation and preservation, most of those references just sit on the shelves. Almost no one has even opened up the books that might help us repair the power grid – or teach us how to make candles, for that matter.

America was racing toward mediocrity even before the fever. It was as if we just couldn't manage to do worse, fast enough. For other reasons, I had a friend who used to say back then that "Rich people don't know how to do much of anything – clean something, drive a nail; take care of their own dog." By that standard, it's as if we all became "rich" overnight. You've got to love the irony.

If we are proficient at anything anymore, it would have to be salvage. There is someone in every community who knows re-purposing. Often it is just one person who figured out how to capture water, grow food and convert all the old computer screens into solar matches. But sometimes, the rare community formed around one person who knew how to turn fats into candles and someone else who could produce food and a third who harnessed the sail. Should I ever again be able to choose the community in which I live, I would like it to be one of those. They understand interdependence, genuinely support exploration and expression, and seem a little less likely to fall under the spell of a charismatic dictator. (Unfortunately, we have no shortage of those!)

But it's not a very practical idea for me to imagine having a choice of community. I was not a young woman at the time of the fever, and I'm 15 years older now. I'm 15 years older in a world where people die from small breaks in the skin which can't get cleaned properly, and food poisoning, and cholera, and a thousand other things very few died of before the fever. The fever hasn't changed our immunity, you understand. But the collapse of society has changed hygiene completely, and we no longer have what we used to consider the simplest tools to work against infection, dehydration, or even basic nutritive needs.

All of which means I'm somewhere on the very surprising side of ancient. I continue to become periodically romanced by the notion that I have become too old to be stolen, that I will never again need to give that speech that begins with, "You know, I'm fairly useless without those nine books and that bag of medicines. . . ." I may be ancient – and rheumatic to boot – but I am also the closest thing to hope in many cases of accident, injury or illness.

As I said, a healer is a very valuable commodity in our post-fever world.

Not surprisingly, I have not met another. (As far as I know, anyway; I have long suspected there are former healers who have chosen to survive in our changed world by hiding their skills.) Precious commodities that we are, healers are one to a locale. I have recognized a certain pattern to the need, size and shape of those locales. But first, a small explanation of what has become of healthcare – what passes for healing.

The shortest answer to what passes for healing is a word I just mentioned, hope. Anyone who can put forth a plausible alternative to depletion, debility and death is providing a valuable service. And if that service also results in recovery and restoration of health (as homeopathy so often does), so much the better. If it doesn't, oddly enough, that's not generally much of a problem. People are quick to accept that someone tried, perhaps provided comfort or lessened the severity of an outcome, even when no real healing occurred.

Whether this tolerance is due to a radical curtailment in expectations or the overall dulling of sensitivity in a population which has seen so much death, I could not say. But I remember when

doctors were both expected to be and generally accorded the attributes of perfection. And practitioners of any other disciplines in healthcare were treated and referred to as something in the range from quack to well-intended also-ran. And even the successful well-intended also-rans were never far from a sharp rebuke underscoring a status less than that of a doctor.

But today when someone asks, “You’re not a doctor, are you?” the answer they want is, “No.”

I always say, “I am a homeopath.” Ironically, that’s the same answer I gave when the desired answer to that question was “yes.” But what I think is important today, what I see in the faces of those who ask is that they want to hear any noun other than “doctor.” I am often tempted (but never try) to say something I am not – chiropractor, acupuncturist, herbalist, shaman, witch, or curandera. Any of those activities might pass for healthcare today. True, in certain circles one or another of those nouns might raise an eyebrow; but the old stigma is gone. Whether you are a homeopath, a shaman, or some other noun that the general public only understands vaguely, you are the closest thing they have seen to a healer since the fever. And no one expects to meet another.

The stigma which exists today is reserved for doctors and what used to be conventional medicine. Personally, I suspect people would still use both doctors and the formerly-conventional medicine if any were around. But the drugs were used up before the fever ended, and I can only imagine that the doctors who survived the epidemic took the opportunity of the migrations to start calling themselves teachers or pilots or some other obsolete profession.

To be sure, there was a time when the rage against doctors and medicine were palpable. Rumors of white coat lynchings circulated regularly during the early years after the fever. In all my travels, I never saw any evidence of such horrors. But the mere fact that the rumors existed is a testament to the depth of the hatred, misunderstanding and disappointment.

John Q. Public really had believed his doctor was perfect and the doctor’s medicine was more-than-capable of curing, well, anything – certainly able to best some weird little fever. But then John Q. was forced to face that his beliefs were extremely, tragically wrong. There is no survivor today who did not lose someone important during the epidemic; many lost everyone who was important. Deaths from the actual fever were not nearly as gruesome as those from the violence and deprivations after, but most of our survivors saw both of those kinds of deaths, and many instances of each.

With so much turmoil and loss, there has to be a scapegoat, some doorstep at which blame may be laid. The very absence of doctors and medicine probably made it even easier for that to be the doorstep where blame stuck. Many survivors were content to limit the blame to the absolute inability to stem the tide of the actual epidemic. Many more took the view that because medicine was ineffective against the disease, it was also to blame for the societal problems which followed. And the usual cluster created or followed the conspiracy theory that doctors had crafted an exotic germ and released it amongst an unsuspecting and unprotected populous, causing the fever as part of some experiment. Regardless of the line of thought, doctors and once-conventional medicine have become decidedly unpopular.

And people who seem to know something about health or illness but can't be associated with doctors or the old style medicine have become decidedly popular. We are, in fact, so popular that we get stolen from one community and transplanted into another – over and over again. We are healers. (I do believe that is the most common title, although I hear whispers of both “woamers” and “wisers” frequently enough that I believe those terms also mean roughly the same thing.)

As near as I can tell, a woamer or a wiser is a learned person with some proclivity to heal. Both terms conjure up images of ancient knowledge and special abilities; each has information or other tools which can be used to improve health. The difference between them is only gender. A woamer is a woman, while a wiser is a man. Both are healers, and healer is a gender-neutral term. So I am a healer, a woamer and a homeopath. When someone asks, I say I am a homeopath.

I don't think any more or fewer people know what a homeopath is now than knew that information before the fever. Which is to say, not very many people know what the heck I'm talking about when I say I'm a homeopath. But they don't care. And I'm not sure they ever did. Definitely, I knew even before the fever that most regular folks didn't give a hoot whether homeopathy or allopathy or any-other-opathy “cured” the ill.

In fact, many either didn't see a difference between those things or were just confused and frustrated that all of the healers weren't using all of the tools. What a client cared about was that the condition was improved or the complaint was relieved. The client also wanted those changes brought about safely, with little or no risk. And if it was possible to do all that affordably, so much the better.

Truth be told, however, few ever asked about the risks; and most who did chose not to believe. Also, there was an entire industry built up around obscuring the costs. It was called insurance, but that's another story.

Excepting the way insurance and other cost constraints created barriers to access in the old days, people basically come to see me now for the same reasons people have always visited healers. They don't feel well, and they would like to feel better – safely and with little or no risk. And if those safe, risk-free interventions bode well for the future, terrific.

But the way people get to me is entirely different. I usually arrive in a new community by way of having been kidnapped and transported if not exactly against my will, then at least without any personal initiation. Even in our post-fever society, these are extreme actions and usually come about because an influential member of the community either needs a healer or wants to create political capital by providing a healer for others. Either way, once the crisis which sent someone to drag me to a location has either passed or diminished, other clients start to present themselves.

The first very many kidnappings were really all about the fever. I often refer to them all as happening after the fever, but that's inaccurate. When I was taken the first time, the fever had pretty much run its course in the small city where I was living. Everyone who was going to contract the disease had; the immune had demonstrated immunity; and virtually everybody who could move either had left or was leaving the city for greener pastures. But the community who

had sent a group of young men out to find and steal a healer, the community into which I arrived, was very much beset by the epidemic of acute disease.

And I barely had the time to put a triage system in place before I was kidnapped and on my way to the next place where the fever was epidemic. And so it went for the first very many kidnappings. I was generally able to make at least some kind of start on care even in the earliest of those communities – show someone how to prioritize cases or understand the progression of symptoms and set up a small water-extended supply of the common homeopathic medicines. Usually, I was also able to teach a community member the basic remedy differentiations I had first taught to Marcy. But time was short between those initial kidnappings, and I never knew how long I would have before the next group came to take me.

I got better at it, of course. And long before the fever had truly burned itself out, I could get a fairly functional clinic set up and running within just a few hours. I often thought it could have happened even faster if only I weren't so darned tired all the time. But one of the problems with being repeatedly snatched and transported roughly is that it wears a body out. I learned quickly that travel was my real window for sleep, but it was rarely comfortable enough to provide much.

The main failing of stealing people is that it is just a form of bullying. And the trouble with bullying is no different during epidemic fever than on the schoolyard: sooner or later, there is always another bully. And when that new bully is bigger or tougher or meaner or some other-er than the original – the cycle starts all over again. And so it was, for the first very many kidnappings.

I really don't have any idea how many places I have come to know in such a manner. I certainly don't know how many there were in the initial round when all the care related to the fever. At some point quite some years ago, I started to say that I had been in two dozen communities in that first month after my initial capture. And by now, I mostly think that I actually counted them before I started to say that. But that may be optimistic. What surely is true is that it felt like a couple dozen communities at that time. And now, it feels like well over a hundred, maybe more.

I have definitely been of service. And I have endeavored to leave each of those communities better than I found it. I teach something every time. Though I often wish I had done more teaching; it is the closest we are coming to making new healers. And those of us who were trained before the fever . . . well, those of us who are left are all 15 years older.

We are officially the world travelers of our new world. It's funny; those first towns were all about the fever. And then there was a group of places where most of the work was about the fever, but at least a few other kinds of cases would show up in the closing days before I was moved on. And eventually there was a community where the fever had already ended before I arrived, and so on. And now, sometimes I wonder if the new community hasn't taken me primarily to learn something of what I've seen of the changes to our world. Don't get me wrong, there is always some health crisis or serious injury. But very quickly these days, people start to ask about other places, and common shortages, and if I've seen any abundance – and all the things we used to learn from newspapers or electronic news vehicles.

I mentioned I was in Texas at the time of the fever. And I have stayed almost exclusively in “the south”, but I have crisscrossed most of what used to be the United States more than once since. My travels might have been noteworthy even in the old days; but now that we don’t have planes or trains or any of the mechanized transport we loved so much, my travels are truly remarkable.

I have seen most of our once-great cities (ghost-towns now) and all of our fresh inland waterways. I have been to both the Gulf and west coasts, passed through lower elevations of the mountains and the very depths of the Grand Canyon. I have spent time both traversing and living in Mexico – though the previously porous border between the southern United States and Mexico is completely irrelevant now. As near as I can tell, nationality is completely irrelevant now.

We actually don’t know what has happened in the rest of the world, but our assumption is that it is much like here. I haven’t been to the east coast, which some would argue is the most likely place for foreign visitors or aid to arrive. (Though I daresay the populous of the west and Gulf coasts would disagree!) But I don’t believe there have been any foreign arrivals at any of those locations. We don’t see airplanes, and there have been no motorized ships during any of my times at the coasts. Electronic communications are no more, of course; and the same is almost true of the fossil fuels. Still, I find it hard to believe that someone wouldn’t have come to check (or plunder) if North America were the only part of the world which had gone completely out of touch.

So we assume things are much the same worldwide. We do hear from the northern portion of this hemisphere enough to know that people are still up there, grinding along much as we do. But it is also true that the cold of northern winters and the lack of a functioning power grid have driven many to resettle in the more temperate zones. Often, I think I would like to see the upper Midwest again, where I spent many of my years, long before the fever. But no one travels for pleasure anymore, and neither my time nor my location are exactly my own.

Our world has become very much smaller. And in that reduced context, I have seen most of it. Between my age and my travels, perhaps I would be interesting even if I weren’t a healer.

The cities are the most changed and also the most the same. The buildings, streets and structures stand unchanged but empty. The traffic lights have gone out; but it doesn’t matter, because there are no people waiting at the intersections. There are no pedestrians on the sidewalks, no cars in the streets. Unlike the energy which used to pulse through even the smallest of the old cities, there is only eerie silence. It feels so strange to those of us who knew the hustle and bustle of earlier days that we are inclined to whisper when we pass through, as many have always done in graveyards.

In daytime, our cities look just like they did before the fever; but they feel like graveyards. Lack of maintenance will eventually change their appearance, too; but, so far, they stand like silent tributes to both the lives and the way of life that died 15 years ago. Many of the cities are not entirely deserted, but there is widespread agreement that the cities of yesteryear will probably never really work again. Even the rare urban dweller will tell you in detail why the cities are dead for good.

Personally, I'm not so sure. Each of the old cities has some spark of its former glory. Some small area has been cleaned up from the remains of death and desertion during the epidemic. Perhaps there are only three where there used to be 5,000; or a few dozen souls where once there were a million. But the real hardscape which made river junctions and trail crossings desirable hundreds of years ago, still make them desirable today. It may only be a spark, but I'm not ready to count the cities out.

I mentioned that the libraries are re-opened in most of the urban centers. And someone is standing duty at those main desks with some degree of regularity. (They don't get paid, of course. But no one really works for money anymore.) And most of the people working those library desks live nearby. Certain storefronts are also functional again. The goods they have for barter are almost all salvaged. But while there are goods, there is a worker; and that worker is usually living either in the store or in a structure with a direct line of sight.

True enough, most of the stores come and go, with individual vendors passing through to swap one mix of possessions for another. But a few locations have established permanent exchanges with someone filling the role of middleman. And the new art of salvage is a perpetually moving target. I was surprised to find stocks of homeopathic medicines in many urban centers years after the fever. But that may just be a reflection of the low awareness of homeopathy during the old days.

Once-common items like toilet paper tell the story more easily. Toilet paper was one of the first items to become unavailable; it was involved in some of the earliest store riots. Paper towels, napkins and tissues followed shortly; and then we were on to phone books, magazines, catalogs, etc. Then came documents from office filing cabinets, uncollected mail, and so on. At each wave of change, the cities have been the main source for pillage. By sheer virtue of so many of us having been so closely packed there, the cities are the sources of the new bounty. From paper products to shoes and clothes, cities are our new mines.

Granted, the cities have already been stripped of many resources. But as we continue to move further and further along in a society with salvage at its center, we also continue to find new uses for the old things. So we dive back into the cities for the items we abandoned in earlier times. Like lack of maintenance, this perpetual plunder will eventually render the cities unrecognizable. But, so far, they stand; and many still have some level of function.

I, too, stand and still have some level of function. You can't count me out just yet. Like so many, I have been a measure of lost since the fever. I may have wrung every drop of comfort and satisfaction out of this gilded cage existence. But it is still a cage. And I have stayed in it, in part, because it was easier than finding my own way.

There have been a handful of times over the years when I have offered to go willingly with those who came for me, on the stipulation that I be freed once the crisis had passed. A few times, I have even gotten agreement. But ultimately, it doesn't quite work out that way. There is disagreement about what constitutes the "crisis", or my "freedom", or a revolving list of petty tyrannies. And sooner or later, it is just more appealing to go with the captors who arrive than to stay with those who promised freedom but wouldn't deliver.

In theory, I could also just walk away from any of these communities. Lord knows, people do it every day in our new existence. Given the effective demise of private property, you just clean up and close up the place where you have been living and walk on until you find a different vacant house you want to move into. (You'll also have to clean that house – and maybe even dispose of human remains still inside. Or maybe that makes a different home more appealing.)

With so few people compared to the number of houses, there have not been many disputes around these issues. But the cities and towns which have re-organized since the fever are beginning to develop new systems to prevent this type of complaint. It would be interesting to know how all that works out in 50 or a hundred years. (My guess is that private property will be back with us at some point.)

As for me becoming one of those who just walks out to my next home, probably not. Each community assigns security to me, of course. And even if I were clever enough to slip my guards, I'm really not that good of a walker. As I have said, I am rheumatic. And it is a bitter irony, indeed; that it took those once-conventional and now non-existent medicines to keep me truly mobile. Oh, I am able to use homeopathy well enough to keep moving and to manage most of the pain. And I am a woman of a certain (old) age now; perhaps I would be no better than this even if the old style medicine had continued.

Back when I was in homeopathy school, they taught me that, "The homeopath who treats herself has a fool for a client and a schlock for a practitioner." I suspect there is a lesson in there about my current state. But I am the only healer I've known since the fever. And, unfortunately, my best work leaves me not a very good walker. Certainly, an average toddler could catch me before I made it all the way out of any of the towns in which I have lived. At a minimum, I would need my own horse and wagon to make an escape. (And even then, I would probably need help to get in the wagon.)

If I could earn a horse, a wagon, and my freedom from one community, then I could travel to another community and introduce myself as a teacher (or pilot or other extinct profession.) I could plant a garden and get another dog. But could I keep my mouth shut when disease or injury came to a neighbor? Probably not.

And I don't think I would want to live in a me who could keep her mouth shut. Our world is very different, but our people are much the same. And I would rather live inside a gilded cage than become a person who stands idly by when I could be providing a helping hand. No doubt there are possibilities between those two extremes; but as I mentioned, I have been a measure of lost since the fever. I hope to find myself some time soon.

In the meantime, I hear the kind of commotion outside which probably means I'll be moving on to another community this very night. I do hope Susy remembers her promise to me about the community garden, and...

It is almost time for me to speak. I begin, "I'm fairly useless without those nine books and that bag of medicines..."