Reading Camus in Our Time of Plague

The aspect of the sea, too, changed; its dark-blue translucency had gone and, under the lowering sky, it had steely or silvery glints that hurt the eyes to look at.

Albert Camus

My dog-eared, water-warped copy of The Plague has sat on my nightstand for the last two and a half years. I often pick it up before bed and read a few pages at random. Though hard to explain, it helps me get to sleep. The Plague has a clean narrative arc; the devastation is profound, but it is circumscribed in time and space. COVID time, in contrast, moves fast and slow and a sense of whirlash is the norm. Finding a storyline amid the coronavirus pandemic only frustrates. Surge lurch forward and subside, recommendations shift, therapeutics come and go, new variants rise. Reading The Plague has been a ritual for me during a period pervaded by a deep disorientation. As cases again rise, I am taking stock of everything that has happened and considering the ways my identity as a physician over the past two and a half years has been altered in fundamental and unanticipated ways.

As for so many people, the arrival of the pandemic changed the nature of my work overnight. We poured ourselves into roles for which we could be of best use rather than in the roles we preferred or felt comfortable in. For me, I was marooned at home, spending long days and nights answering pages as my kids sang and played nearby. As an infectious diseases physician, I remotely advised colleagues about patients I would never meet, sick with a disease I barely understood. Approving courses of remdesivir and tocilizumab—in those early days, it felt like throwing darts at a board. I read feverishly, trying to approximate as much mastery as one could at that time.

I feel most like myself at the bedside, which made doctoring at a distance its own kind of trial, an exercise in an unfamiliar version of courage. Although physically removed from the devastation in the hospital, I was consumed by the pandemic response. I tried to embody objectivity and calm. I felt a crucial part of my role was to read and interpret, to filter noise, to recognize patterns, and to keep a cool head. Beyond the lasting impression of meeting amazing new colleagues from all corners of my organization, this period is otherwise mostly a blur.

By the summer of 2020, as the first wave of cases calmed and deaths started to decline, I had no idea how to make sense of what just happened or what to expect. Back at the bedside, I tried to be brave and smart in what felt like a changed place. In many ways, COVID-19 is an illness like any other, an awful episode of debility and fear. But caring for patients with COVID-19 felt different to me, and there was a vividness to that time that is challenging to describe—a strange, intense brew of kindness, vulnerability, suffering, and sacrifice.

What’s more, the pandemic has shored up my conviction that caring for patients is a total gift and having good colleagues is everything—my endurance never would have outlasted the times of intense crises without them.

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Friends and family outside of medicine often inquire about what it has been like to be an infectious diseases physician during a pandemic, and I don’t know what to say. No pat metaphor or narrative avails itself. Yes, my clinical acumen has improved and ultimately, I am a better doctor for having been through this. What’s more, the pandemic has shored up my conviction that the opportunity to care for patients is a total gift and having good colleagues is everything—my endurance never would have outlasted the times of intense crises without them.

None of this is to say that I am grateful for this experience. I am strong, but I am not whole and may never be. I am unsure where to put the accumulated feelings of the last two and half years and wonder whether I have changed or the nature of suffering has somehow changed in its intensity. I am particularly sorry for all the strain of this time on my young family. As a mother of 2, I was moody and distant at times, and as a partner worse still. In response to this monstrous time, some physicians have hardened and withdrawn under the twin burdens of grief and endless work. I understand this response too. We have lived through the collective convulsion of the world and recovery from that experience is not a forgone conclusion for any of us.

In *The Plague*, as death swarms into the town of Oran, Dr Rieux (the novel’s protagonist) notes a new lens through which he sees the world, one that renders even the sea’s appearance altered. Out of COVID’s crucible, my lens has also changed. My days are animated now by a new sense of both inspiration and anguish, felt in equal measure. Doctoring is different. History will find its silver linings and lessons, but for me, as the pandemic stretches before us, this is what I carry forward. And in the end, despite the challenges of working through the stress and tragedy of the moment, rolling up my sleeves was better than wringing idle hands.

**Conflict of Interest Disclosures:** None reported.