



FROM THE REMAINS

REFLECTIONS ON *STATION ELEVEN*

EDITED BY ROBIN A. BEDENBAUGH

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Reflections on *Station Eleven*

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Robin A. Bedenbaugh



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“Whenever a phone is found, on a nightstand,
in a car, or in the hip pocket of a corpse,
the adventure will begin. What does it
contain? Trivialities or treasures?”



Shelly O'Barr

What Wisdom Lies Within?

Bruce J. MacLennan

I work on artificial intelligence and unconventional computing technologies, such as quantum computing. After reading *Station Eleven*, my immediate thought was: after the collapse, when the power grid goes down for good, my occupation will cease to exist. Moreover, few of my computer science skills would be relevant to the immediate demands of survival or to the eventual rebuilding of civilization. On reflection, however, I realized that computing technology would survive and even increase in value. The hint is in *Station Eleven* itself, where we read of an inventor in Traverse City running a laptop off a bicycle-powered generator.

Although the Internet will be gone, many smartphones and other small computing devices will survive, and they will be more useful than the book implies. When it is important to do so, they will be recharged from gasoline generators, so long as there is fuel to burn. Solar-powered rechargers will become very valuable and might be looted from stores and warehouses. Over the years, as the lithium batteries wear out, they can be replaced with new ones from abandoned warehouses. Even in the absence of manufactured batteries, we will be able power our devices, for it's not hard to make a crude battery sufficient to power a phone.

Why go to all this trouble? Even without the Internet, smartphones will be valuable. They have flashlights. They have cameras. They have

GPS, which remarkably will continue to function (but gradually lose accuracy as satellite and receiver clocks drift). In some cases, phones will contain cached maps and other useful information, and they can be used also to photograph rare or fragile documents useful for survival and rebuilding civilization.

Each phone will be precious as a time capsule of the antediluvian world, a snapshot of its owner's life in the last weeks before the collapse: desperate final text messages and emails, videos of the accelerating chaos, cached news reports. Much of this will be ephemeral, of value only to the owner or as a reminder of the past—nostalgic remnants of a lost world. (Put your phone in airplane mode and see what is in it now.) Some phones, however, will be treasure troves, containing precious works of literature, art, and music. Ebook readers will be mini portable libraries. Some phones will contain information that's actually useful for survival and for building the new world, but I expect they will be the exceptions.

Since USB flash drives and SD cards are tough and plentiful, many will survive and be used for transferring and storing data. I expect a healthy trade in these receptacles for valuable information. Amazingly, Bluetooth will continue to work, allowing devices to exchange data over short distances. Some apps will also be precious items to share, so long as they work without the Internet. Unfortunately computer viruses and other forms of malware will continue to be a threat, spreading more slowly than the Georgia flu—but disturbingly parallel to it.

Whenever a phone is found, on a nightstand, in a car, or in the hip pocket of a corpse, the adventure will begin. What does it contain? Trivialities or treasures? Can it be recharged? Is it locked? Can it be hacked? Those who have the necessary skills will be sought after; they will deserve to be called “wizards.”

Smartphones and tablets are pretty tough and should last for a long time if treated with care. Repairing them, of course, will be impossible, except for replacing a battery or a broken screen (and these only so long as replacement parts can be salvaged). It will be a long, long time before new semiconductor chips can be manufactured. Each loss will be permanent. I imagine smartphones will be viewed like the alethiometers in *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman—precious artifacts, marvelous devices that can never be created again, repositories of truth to the wizards who know the arcane secrets for consulting them, almost magical tools of wonder in a newly medieval world.

The time has come when each must do his
own work of redemption. Mankind has
grown older and a new month has begun.

—Carl Jung, *The Red Book*

The loss of computing technology will be a loss of information and communication. Much more serious will be the loss of collective human wisdom and connection. Once Maslow's basic and safety needs are satisfied, people will wonder again about the meaning of life and the significance of what has happened to their world. Institutions that traditionally have addressed these concerns, such as churches, will no longer exist, and self-appointed messiahs, such as Prophet Tyler, will fill the vacuum. As *Station Eleven* shows, they are destructive to their followers and dangerous to outsiders. Therefore people will be thrown back upon their native psychological resources and their inborn sources of meaning. What are they?

For most of the two hundred thousand or so years since modern humans emerged in Africa, we have been foragers living in nomadic

groups of several dozen, occasionally and warily encountering other such groups. This is the environment in which we evolved and to which our brains are adapted. This is also the situation in which most people will live for the first few years after the collapse. Since they will be aware of the possibility of agriculture, however, it will be only a few years before the survivors begin to settle down with livestock and crops. So also basic industrialization will begin again, building on the remnants from the old world.

Humans have had agriculture and cities for five hundred generations. But for at least ten thousand generations before that (and arguably for at least a hundred thousand as premodern hominins) we were nomadic foragers. Evolution moves slowly, and civilization is a veneer that has not penetrated deep into our DNA. Therefore, our evolved psychological structures are adapted to the environment that produced us: foraging in small bands. This is the root of the archetypal psychological structures that regulate our lives and that are the foundations of meaning and significance for human beings. The function of these unconscious archetypes is to govern perception, motivation, affect, and behavior to achieve biological ends. They represent what it has meant, in an evolutionary sense, to be a human being and to live a human life.

The archetypes are familiar from many myths and folktales because they are residents of our psyches: clever maidens, wise old men, powerful witches, tricksters, magicians, heroes, nurturing mothers, evil sorcerers, dangerous strangers, and the many gods, goddesses, and nature spirits. After the collapse, people will be thrown back on their own archetypal resources to find meaning, inspiration, and guidance. Often they will project these archetypes onto other people, and sometimes they will be possessed by archetypally engendered complexes in their own unconscious minds. Thus are prophets born and thus their followers bewitched.

When people don't recognize the archetypes as residents of their own psyches, they project them outward, either onto other people or into the heavens as gods. Given the absence of established institutional religion after the collapse, I hope that people would learn that wisdom comes from contacting the gods within. Part and parcel of this insight is the humility to recognize that everyone has this access if they seek it; each can be the prophet of their own religion. That is the humility lacking in Prophet Tyler.

The archetypes embody the evolutionary wisdom of humankind, but they function as autonomous subpersonalities and have their own agendas. They served us well for two hundred thousand years but might not be so well adapted to the present. There is no guarantee that they will conform to contemporary ethics, nor should they be blindly obeyed. On the other hand, ignoring or repressing the archetypes' needs and demands can harm mental health, and we will forfeit the gifts they have to offer. Therefore we should engage with these archetypal figures.

To tap into these wellsprings of meaning, creativity, and guidance, post-collapse survivors will need to learn to access the archetypal figures in their own unconscious minds and to negotiate with them. This inward journey can be accomplished by techniques from analytical psychology, such as active imagination, but also by contemplative and meditative practices from the world's religious and spiritual traditions. After the collapse everyone will need to become a visionary, or they will become the blind followers of other people's visions.

The archetypes are shared by all people; that is the unconscious connection that binds us into a common humanity. But each of us has a unique perspective on the archetypes, filtered through our individual psyches, conditioned by personal experience and psychological development. Therefore no one has privileged access to the naked Truth, and it is essential to recognize this ineradicable

subjectivity. Widespread understanding that these personal revelations are symbolic, like dreams, should discourage literal interpretation and blind acceptance by others. When everyone is a prophet of their own religion, with no presumption of superiority, then people can discuss their insights, not as a means of founding cults to exert power over others but as a means of making meaning together. From this will emerge a new understanding of the ways to live a human life grounded in our common humanity but respecting each person's unique individuality.

Knowing that wisdom lies within and knowing the means to access it will help humanity to survive and thrive after the collapse—but why wait for a pandemic?

I give you news of the way of *this* man, but
not of your own way. My path is not your
path, therefore I cannot teach you. The way
is within us. . . . Within us is the way, the
truth, and the life. . . . So live yourselves.

—Carl Jung, *The Red Book*