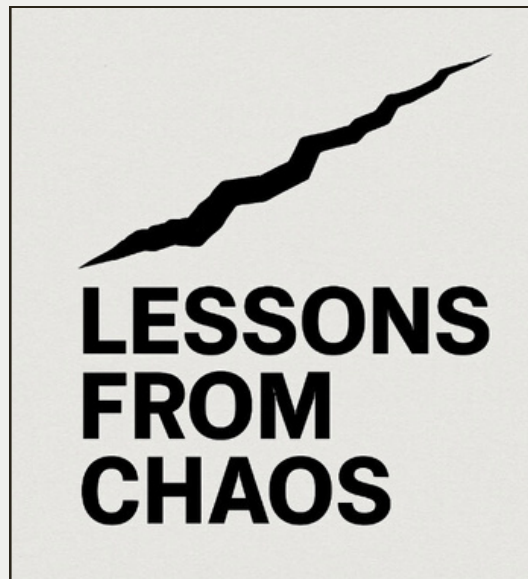


Ten Lessons from Chaos: A Primer



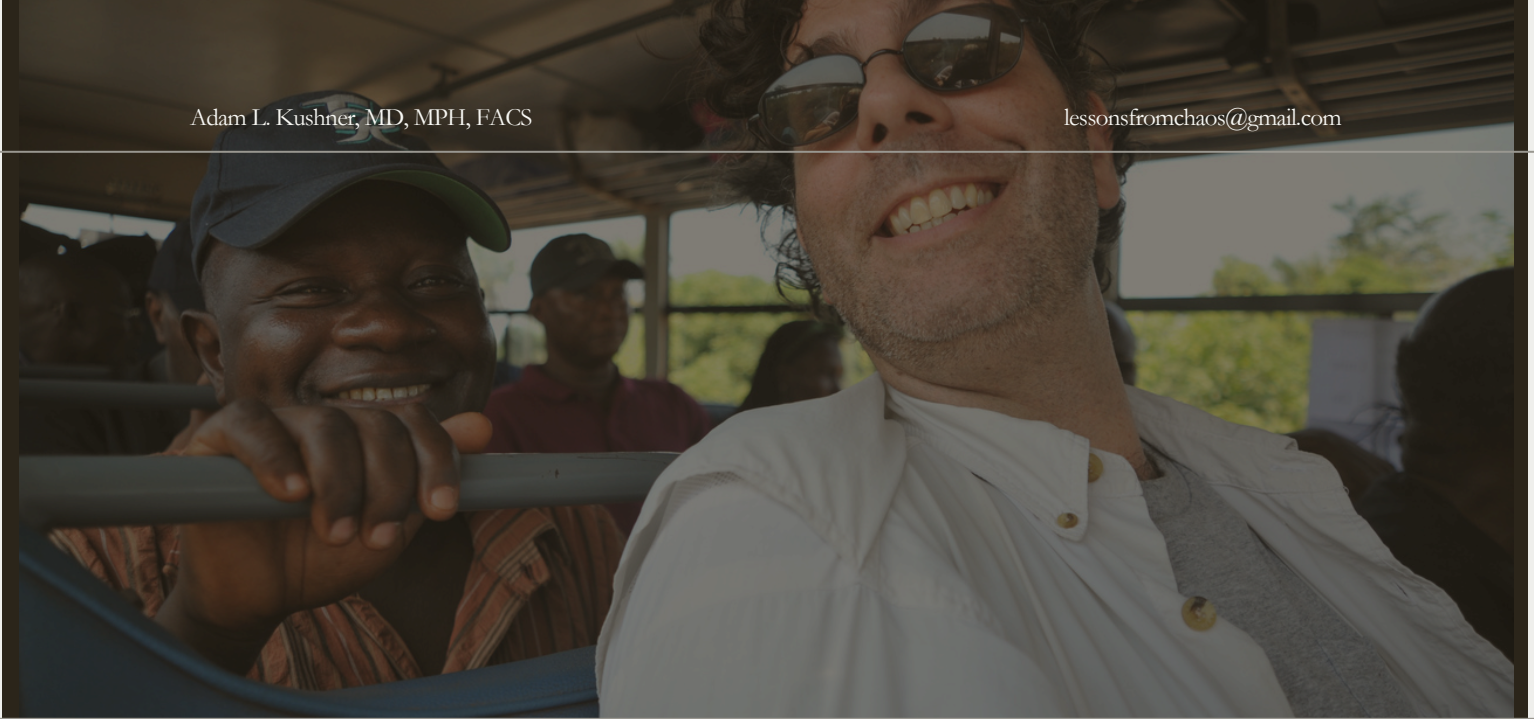
A simple guide for working in places where things
don't work

I spent two decades saving lives where plans fail, institutions crumble, and Chaos is the default. I've advised Generals, Ministers, and Foundation Presidents. These LESSONS are not theory, they are the patterns I recognized that kept me and others alive and allowed us to do good work.

These ten LESSONS are a primer. They are necessary but not sufficient. Study them, but remember you'll be attempting to function in Chaos.

Enjoy.

Adam



Lesson from Chaos #1: Have fun

I'm not like other humanitarians. When you ask most aid workers why they do what they do, most say, "To help."

Sure, that's an overall reason, but let's face it, we could help back home or in many other ways. Why are you out in the field? Far from home. Usually uncomfortable.

For me the real answer was to have fun.

I've been criticized and berated for this, but it's the truth.

Take for example, the time I went with the Sierra Leone delegation of the West African College of Surgeons to their annual meeting in Conakry, Guinea. Two months after a military coup. We drove for thirteen hours over unpaved roads in an overcrowded bus with no air conditioning. It was fun.

It might not be the type of fun most folks enjoy, but that's my point.

LESSON #1: If you don't enjoy these environments, you won't be much help.

Sure it's not always easy to have fun, but if you're an expat/international staff you have a choice to be there, the locals don't. So even on the bad days, smile and fake it.



Yugoslavia's Crisis Sparks Fears of More Nationalist Violence in Europe

Adam L. Kushner, MD, MPH, FACS

Garamond

lessonsfromchaos@gmail.com

Lesson from Chaos #2: An idiot

In 1991, I was in Czechoslovakia. It was the era of the Pink Revolution. The Iron Curtain had fallen.

One night, I met up with a buddy, who was a Reuters photographer.

“Slovenia and Croatia declared independence today,” he said. “I’m heading there tomorrow. Wanna go?”

“Absolutely.”

We ended up in Slovenia. Our guide was shot and killed. Jets flew overhead. Tanks fired at us.

If my buddy or the soldiers or the local civilians got killed or injured, they had a reason to be there. I was an idiot. A tourist in a war zone.

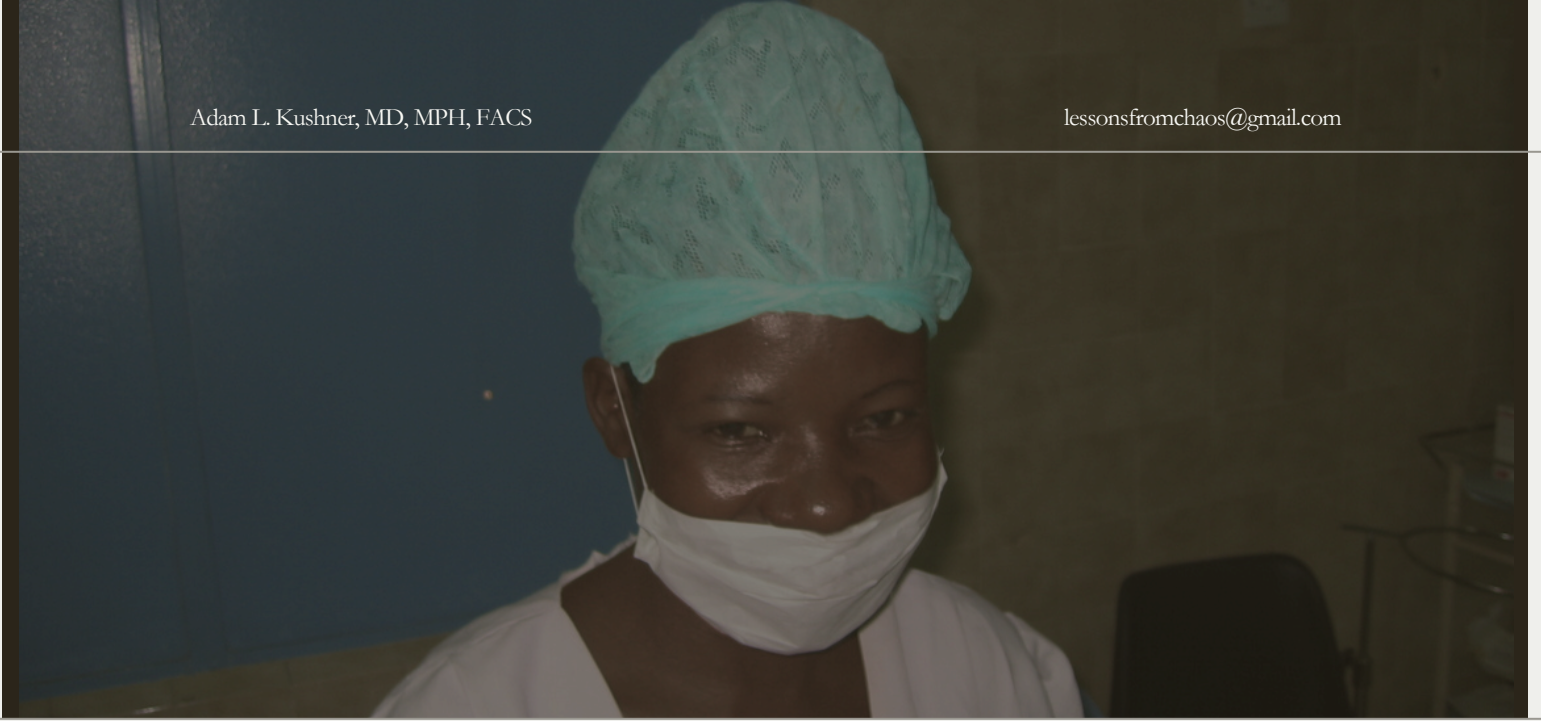
Anthony Loyd put it best in his memoir, *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*:

“Men and women who venture into someone else’s war through choice do so in a variety of guises...never blind yourself with your own disguise.”

- *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, Anthony Loyd

LESSON #2: Confident ignorance is a potential killer.

In any low-resource or conflict setting, unless it’s your home, you’re a visitor, a tourist. Remember that!



Lesson from Chaos #3: Doctor, we have none

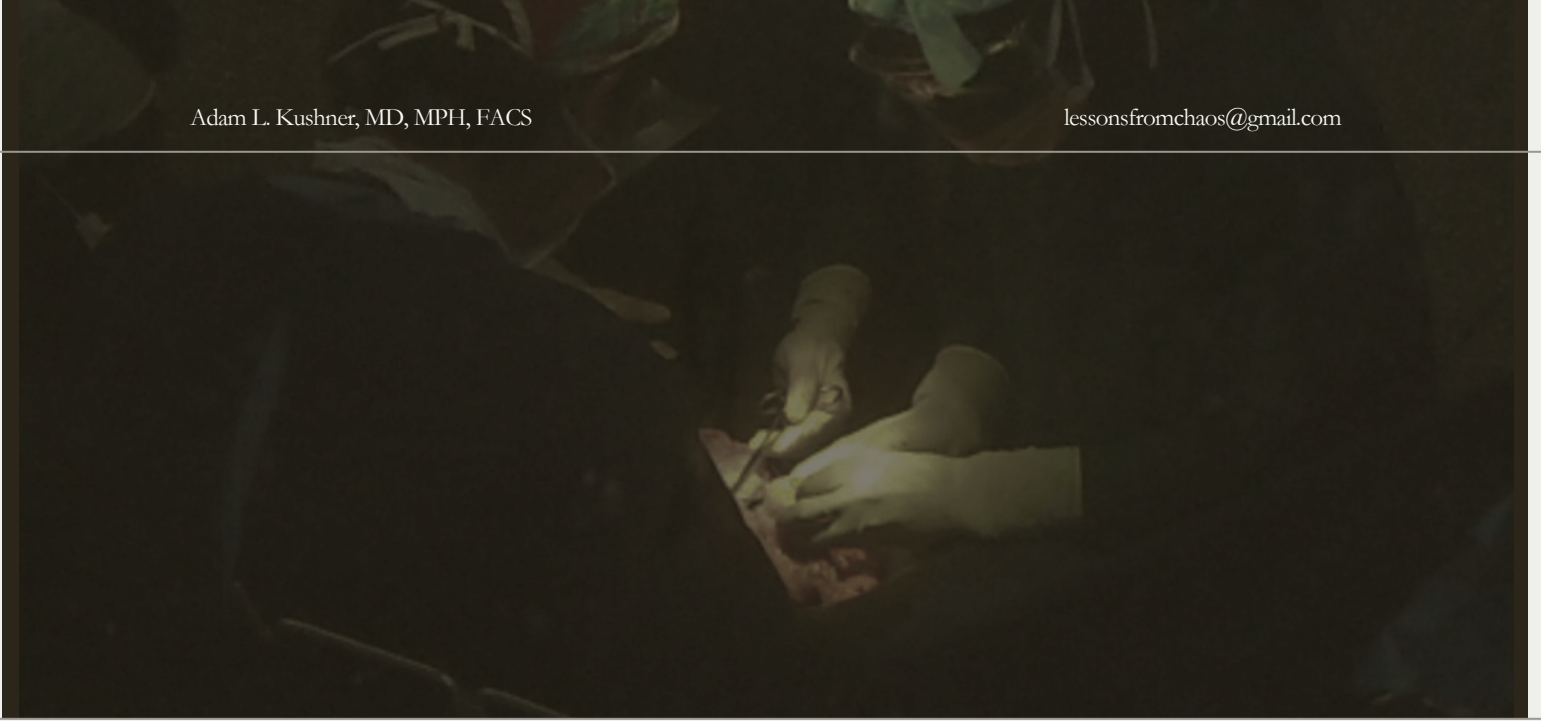
It was my first case in Malawi. Thirty percent of surgical patients were HIV positive. Ready to cut, I looked at Sister Lewende, my assistant and one of the local nurses.

With horror and disdain, I asked, “Sister, where is your eye protection?”

She looked at me calmly and addressed me like I was a child. “Doctor, we have none,” she said.

LESSON #3: Leave your high-income, ivory tower assumptions at home.

When you arrive in a new environment, you’re usually jet lagged and clueless. Acknowledge that, keep your mouth shut, look and listen.



Lesson from Chaos #4: For want of a lightbulb

For want of a nail...the rider was lost. -Benjamin Franklin

An assessment of surgical capability in Sierra Leone identified a lack of operating room lightbulbs.

While waiting for a shipment, a message went out, "The main operating room has only one lightbulb left."

A colleague transported five sample bulbs which arrived just before the OR went dark.

LESSON #4: Be mindful of the small things, they can easily shut down your program.

You may have big plans, but if the small stuff gets missed, you're screwed.

Petites Compresses	13	
Grandes Comp. Abdo.	10+5	
Fils Sertis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - V/Cord 1 (30mm) 2 - V/Cord 1 (30mm) 7 - V/Cord 2-10 : 4+8 - Nylon 2-0 : 1 	
Fils non-Sertis	0	
Gants Steriles.	7.5 1+1 8.5 8 7 4.5 7	

Lesson from Chaos #5: Dirty African hospital

I once worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We had a 100% post-operative wound infection rate.

I went to the Field Coordinator and reported the problem.

She said, "It's a dirty African hospital."

"F-U," I said. "I've worked in forty 'dirty African hospitals' and never had this problem. Patients are safer at home. When did this start and what happened then?"

Turns out it was the new 90,000 Euro autoclave.

We went back to sterilizing equipment with an old autoclave heated over charcoal and the infections stopped.

They blamed the country, not the machine.

LESSON #5: Don't assume expensive high tech is the best solution.

When problems occur, and they will, don't immediately blame the locals or the situation. Ask, what did I do differently that might have contributed to this? There's a good chance the problem is you.



Lesson from Chaos #6: Local experts > Expats

Three months after the 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami, I was working in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. We had a second earthquake, an 8.7.

I went with a team to assess the damage. We found 30,000 displaced persons. The team consisted of a logistician, a water and sanitation guy, both civil engineers, and a public health nurse. All were locals.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“Rent a warehouse and order supplies,” said the log.

“Dig boreholes and pit latrines,” said the wat-san.

“Train community health workers,” said the nurse.

“Great,” I said. “Go do it.”

“Don’t you want to come along?” they asked.

“Nope. I’m going back to the hotel,” I said. “Get me when you need money.”

Later they told me the local staff had a saying, “You may be expat, but I’m expert.”

LESSON #6: Find the local experts. Give them autonomy and resources. Then get the hell out of their way.

Look for the local staff, especially the quiet one. They know what’s going on.



Lesson from Chaos #7: Pissed off expats

At a training program in South Sudan most cases were small and elective. When emergencies came in the local staff mobilized as well as any US or European trauma team.

Cholera broke out. Another organization set up a Cholera Treatment Center. They were short of doctors.

“Mind if I help with the cholera?” I asked the local senior surgeon.

“Not a problem.”

Our Field Coordinator felt the same way.

The only person upset was the international nurse. To him elective appendectomies and hemorrhoid surgery was more important.

LESSON #7: International staff will cry the loudest about wanting to help but will sabotage the good for their vision of better.

Figure out what the real motivation of international staff is. You'll be surprised how rarely it's about the patient.



Lesson from Chaos #8: It wasn't so bad

A government donor wanted to “do something” in Sudan.

A rundown operating room with no air conditioning and holes in the roof seemed like a good investment of 300,000 euros.

A contractor was hired. The building renovated.

The Ambassador was there for the reopening.

Before the ceremony I turned to the local surgeon, “It looks really nice.”

“It wasn't so bad before,” was his only comment.

LESSON #8: Talk to the locals and find out what is really needed.

Donors mostly want a nice photo-op.

Many useful solutions don't require massive amounts of money. If getting rid of cash without looking foolish is the goal, own it.



Lesson from Chaos #9: There's no place like home

A ten-kilometer minefield ringed the town.

Peace had returned and so had the population. There was no room to build. During the dry season people began building homes beyond the perimeter.

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“They have no choice,” was the reply.

LESSON # 9: What’s risky for you may be worth the risk for the local population.

The locals are not crazy. Think about what you would do in their situation.



Lesson from Chaos #10: They want an operating room

In the DRC I visited a remote village for a site visit.

Beside the clinic was a pile of bricks.

“What are those for?” I asked.

“The community decided they need an operating room, so women don’t have to travel for c-sections,” said the local doctor. “Whenever they come to the clinic, they bring two bricks. When there is enough, we will build.”

LESSON #10: Local populations know what they want. With enough resources they can take care of themselves.

The community will tell you what they want and need, if you look.

Ten Lessons from Chaos

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lessonsfromchaos@gmail.com
www.alkushner.com