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Wildfire Recovery: Words of Wisdom

OCTOBER 16, 2017



AUTUMN

The smoke is still thick and many of my friends have lost their homes. I lost my home in a Sonoma fire many years ago and would like to share what I learned from that experience. These are simple “words of wisdom” based upon the recovery process that I went through. In my situation, the fire wall was approaching my property quickly, so I gave each of my children a black plastic garbage bag, told them to quickly gather their favorite things and that we needed to leave right away. Then I loaded everything in the car, including two very anxious, large, black labrador dogs and raced down the narrow mountain road in the hills of Sonoma. The fire was upon us: the heat and sound alone were incredible.

Since that time, I have developed a three-step system for fire recovery. The first step is to stabilize yourself and those around you. Do check back as I will be posting my other two steps over time. This seems to be where we are today in Sonoma and Napa County. Although it may sound simple, I hope that something here can be of help.

Step One:

STABILIZE YOURSELF

- **Find a place to stay:** This is obvious, but it can be a little challenging. I stayed with a friend first, then moved to a hotel, then to another friend’s house, then back to my property. Although my home burned down completely, I had another structure into which I could move.

- **After you contact your insurance company, sign up with FEMA:** I was at a meeting last night in Sonoma and they offered many resources to get you started with money and housing. In my case, I did not have FEMA.
- **Organize what things you do have:** In this time of confusion, bring as much clarity and order to the few items that you may have saved from your home.
- **When you have a little money from insurance, buy something special:** I bought a couple of cashmere cardigans to be soft and luxurious against my skin during this sad and trying time. They also were to keep me warm, and to remind me of beauty in the world during the coming days.
- **Set up a daily routine:** In the midst of chaos, it is important to have your own daily routine. Although it may sound crazy, it is possible. Mine included a simple breakfast with a pot of tea, working all day, exercise in the late afternoon, making dinner with the family, reading/journaling and sleep.
- **Keep a journal:** I found it helpful to download my thoughts from the day onto paper, where I see it visually and make a little more sense of my time.
- **Get the kids settled:** This was a big project in my case, but basically help them to connect with school or friends and build a routine for them. Lots of hugs and words of encouragement are essential. As my kids had watched their home burn from a distance, I reassured them that we would buy new things to replace what was lost and that it would be fun.
- **Give everyone a basket of painting supplies:** My art baskets included: wicker baskets with a handle, a high quality watercolor set, a few extra paint brushes, good paper, two glass jars for water, a good pencil and a good eraser.
- **Play soothing music:** I played classical music to bring calm.
- **Have dinner and breakfast as a family:** In my case, it was tempting to let everyone do what they wanted, as I had so much on my mind, but it was quite important to gather for breakfast and dinner to share the meal and thoughts each day.
- **Book of daily thoughts:** I read a quick quote each morning for inspiration. My fire situation occurred a number of years ago and at that time, I read a book called *Grace Notes*, by Alexandra Stoddard. Today, I might also look at *Offerings*, by Danielle and Olivier Föllmi.

Based on experience, these are a few of the things that I would pull together first. Please let me know if this is helpful, and check back, as I will be posting more over time.



Evening, while the fire is still blazing in the hills



First responders from San Joaquin County



A beautiful 'dozer from Bushey's Custom Farming in Canby, California, also a first responder



Late day meetings after 24 hours of work



On the left is the house and land that I owned and brought back to life after it burned in the Cavedale Fire. As you can see, the recent wildfire is approaching. On the right is me in San Francisco, having left Sonoma in the middle of the fire a few days ago. Take care, and remember that I am always here as a resource for you.



Wildfire Recovery, Words of Wisdom: Step Two

DECEMBER 13, 2017



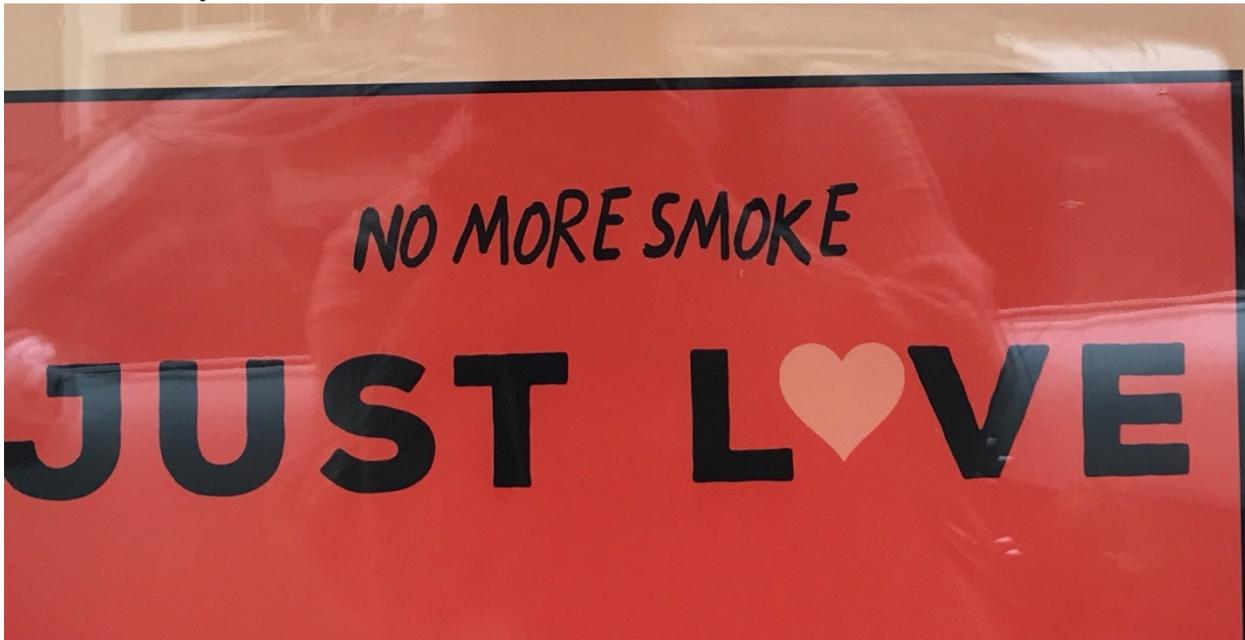
It has been over a month since the wildfires have been extinguished in Sonoma and Napa Counties. Thus, I wanted to share with you a few more words of wisdom that I learned from my own wildfire recovery process. The following thoughts make up what I consider to be the second step, or phase, of pulling life back together and moving forward after a fire. My property in Sonoma sustained both full destruction and partial destruction to land and structures many years ago, so hopefully, something here can be of help to you.

STEP TWO:

Recall and Build Your Team

- **Recall, Record and Research:** Begin the process of remembering the contents or state of your home/property before the fire. Home insurance companies usually have a template for this or you can create a spreadsheet. I have provided an example below of one that I used. In my case, I went about the process of visualizing the interior and exterior of my home that had burned down completely. For the structures that had been damaged, and the land, I looked for drawings and markers which confirmed the original footprint.
- **After you have a general scheme of the areas affected, focus your visualization upon opening the drawers in your mind and recording what you see inside:** This takes a little time. It is important to include closets, work rooms and jewelry boxes just as they had looked the last time you saw them. The reason for this is to either replace or be reimbursed for what is lost/damaged. Next, write down an estimated value of the item when you purchased it and what it would cost to replace now. In my case, I had a lawsuit against the entity found responsible for the fire, so this information was critical. It is quite important to start this as soon as possible, while your

memory is most fresh. Pictures and video are helpful, but many times your memory is most accurate.



1	2	3	4	5	6	7	7.1
Item	Qty.	DESCRIPTION OF ARTICLES Make, Model, Size, Serial Number	Whom Purchased or Recd Name and Address	Date Purch or Received	Original Cost	Replacement or Repair Cost	Extended Cost
1	1	GIN	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1995	\$ 29.70	29.7	29.7
2	1	VODKA	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1995	\$ 33.48	33.48	33.48
3	1	WHISKEY	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1996	\$ 25.79	25.79	25.79
4	12	PACKS MIXERS	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1996	\$ 2.50	2.95	35.4
5	6	LIQUORS	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1996	\$ 12.42	12.42	74.52
6	2	COGNAC	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1995	\$ 29.16	29.16	58.32
7	1	BOURBON	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1995	\$ 12.42	12.42	12.42
8	2	CASE BEER	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1996	\$ 16.00	16	32
9	1	LOT ASST GROCERIES DRY	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1996	\$ 25.00	25	25
10	2	CASES RED WINE	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1995	\$ 600.00	711	711
11	1	CASE WHITE WINE	SONOMA MARKET, SON	1996	\$ 300.00	355.5	355.5
12	12	JARS STRAWBERRY JAM	HOMEMADE	1996	\$ 3.00	5	60
13	1	DUST BUSTER VACUME CLEANER	FREIDMAN, SONOMA	1995	\$ 39.00	45	45
14	1	STAINLESS LARGE SOUP SCOOPER	GIFT	1993	\$ 24.00	27	27
15	2	KIDS FISHING POLES&REEELS	BAIT & TACKLES, SONOMA	1995	\$ 87.00	97	194
16	6	CANS CHAINSAW OIL	COMPLETE SVC, SONOMA	1994	\$ 5.00	6	36
17	1	LARGE TIN GARBAGE CAN	PARSONS	####	18	21	21

Example of contents listing from a laundry room

Gather professionals who will comprise the Recovery Team: The Following are a few of the general categories which I used to build a team. Each group then contained the consultants and contractors who worked with me during the recovery process.

Land

- erosion control and soil consultant
- survey company
- logging company

Trees and Landscaping

- forester, tree or vine consultant
- arborist
- landscaping company, for drawings of original gardens/land plan
- tree removal service
- consultant analysis of grape acreage
- soil analysis





This is a view from my property after the fire clean-up effort and a recent photo of the hills at dusk

Clean-Up

- debris removal company
- plumbing repair contractor
- contaminated soil removal business
- building contractor
- well and pump repair business

- painting contractor, exterior and interior
- smoke damage cleaning contractor
- pool contractor, for pool and pool cover
- leak detection company
- electrician
- heating contractor
- rug/furniture cleaning service
- mail box provider
- glass repair company
- gate repair business
- gardeners

Structures

- structural engineer
- contractor to rebuild
- architect for replacement and repair
- septic construction company
- specialty contractor for unique structures
- water tank consultant

Professionals

- lawyer
- insurance agent
- real estate appraisers and consultants

Other (this could be press or television)

- video to document
- film from television station
- photos

Lawsuit related

- district attorney
- mediation specialist
- soil and tree analysis representative
- forester (I had over 100 acres of land burn)
- land appraiser
- attorney



Signs of gratitude

Hopefully, your situation is not as complicated as what I sustained, and you do not need to enlist the help of all these professionals. Looking back though, it is the pulling together of these wonderful people, and companies, which begins the most rewarding part of wildfire recovery. I had team meetings, group lunches and many mornings of strong coffee with donuts. With a spirit of acceptance and gratitude the process moves along. In many ways, this can be considered an adventure; it certainly was for me. Obviously, each phase has many elements; when moving from one to the next, a true sense of accomplishment and success is apparent. This is the unexpected beauty of wildfire recovery.

As I have mentioned previously, please let me know here, or send me an email, if I can be of any help to you.



Wishing you a Happy Holiday Season.

Wildfire Recovery, Words of Wisdom: Step Three

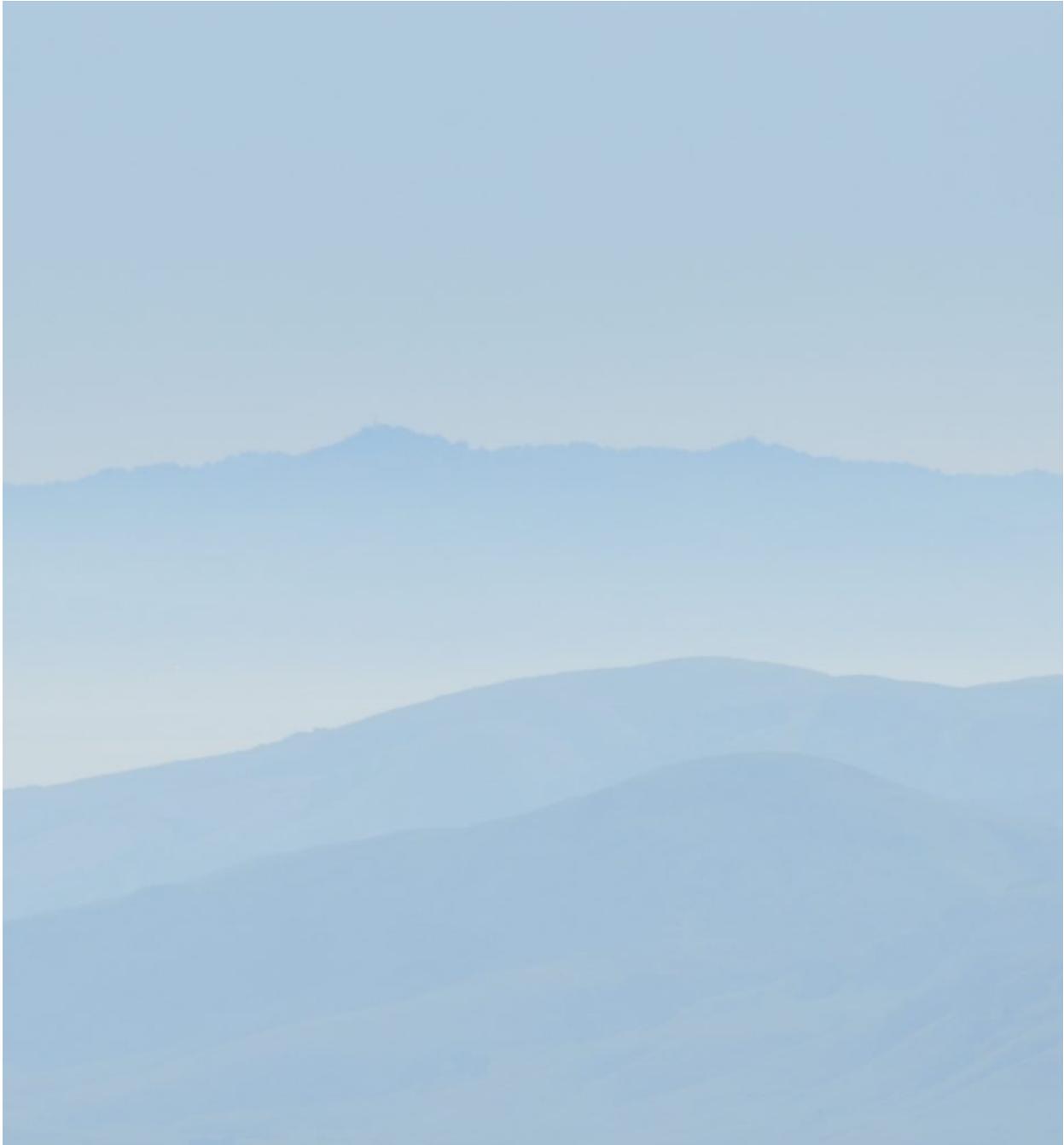
FEBRUARY 21, 2018



WINTER

With the embers now extinguished in the historic Northern California and Southern California fires of 2017, I hope that what I share here from my personal experiences with wildfire recovery can streamline or simplify the process for anyone affected by these fires. As mentioned previously, a few years ago, the Cavedale Fire blew through the hills of Sonoma & Napa County, burned my home to the ground, and affected or burned six of my other structures and approximately 140 acres of my land. This required efforts for rebuilding, renovation, erosion control and logging to bring back the property and natural environment. Full recovery from that wildfire did happen. This came about only after a few challenging years of constant attention to detail by myself, my family and a team of professionals.

Previously, I have written Steps [One](#) and [Two](#) of what I call the “Three Steps” to fire recovery. Whether you are rebuilding a home from the foundation up, renovating a partially damaged property or repairing a structure or land, the stepping stones to recovery are very similar. Based upon my experience, the most important components to recovery are grouped into these three steps.



STEP THREE

- **Gather your team together and create a plan:** It is important to have a strategy of which all the people and companies involved in your project are aware and can follow with you. Last month, I mentioned the variety of categories and professionals who made up my team. This blueprint or plan of your ideas can be as simple as having your current intentions for the home written on a piece of paper of which everyone receives a copy, or, it can be

more detailed version created on the computer. In my case, I did both. I had a written document which I kept organized in a large binder. On my computer, I had a detailed translation of that vision in an Excel spreadsheet. All responsibilities and timelines were as clearly outlined as possible. Being organized in the midst of the inevitable chaos that a fire brings is quite important. This plan helps to inform and guide the overall path for almost everything that is done on your property. Of course, it is key that all involved sign off on the plan and timeline.

The ability to proceed forward each day toward a goal, track your success, and keep individual accountability is the value of sticking with a plan. The following are a few key points which, when I look back, were instrumental in my ability to ultimately craft a successful fire recovery.

- **Divide and conquer:** In order to most efficiently work the plan, the first thing that I did was to assign general responsibility. Having a main contact point for each of the different priority areas allows the work to be divided up, and gives a feeling of control. For example, someone was in charge of the insurance contract and communication with the insurance company, and another person was working daily on contents which included recording lost items and researching current values. At the end of the day, we would check in and celebrate our accomplishments or re-work the plan as needed.



Looking out the open doors of one of my houses in Sonoma....

Important Groups

1. ***Insurance:*** Read and re-read the insurance policy. Talk with the adjustor regularly; if needed, connect with his supervisor and/or headquarters. This is such an important component to being able to do what you aspire to do. In many ways, it is the constant which allows you to move your ideas forward.
2. ***Money Management:*** The payments come from different areas in the insurance and recovery process. Managing and keeping track of this with an

outside professional or on a spreadsheet brings clarity to a sometimes confusing situation.

3. **Legal Advice:** In my case, I hired a very experienced corporate litigator, the best that I could find. This was important to my success and my piece of mind. I paid for the legal advice by the hour. Today, in Northern California, many tort lawyers are trying to bring together groups of people for a larger, group case. I was advised that paying by the hour would cost me much less money than if I paid the lawyer/firm a percentage of any claim. This proved to be true. The multiple layers of value that a truly capable attorney offers are invaluable. Things which I did not understand, my lawyer understood completely. His confidence and complete grasp of the process helped my confidence and ability to keep proceeding along.
4. **Contractors:** It was important for me to meet with my main contractors once a week, preferably over coffee. We were able to stay in sync with what we were accomplishing and to make changes as needed. When an adjustment happened, everyone was updated and kept on track. I also often used the telephone to communicate. The importance of stepping away from the computer and hopping on the phone to speak directly with those who you are working with can not be underestimated. When important issues were on the table, we scheduled a meeting immediately, usually on the property.
5. **Real Estate Support:** I would add this area today because many people have decided that it will take quite a bit of time to rebuild, so they are purchasing a new property. This fresh home is a place to settle and to find happiness and calm while the older property is being renovated or sold. As you may know, [I am a real estate professional](#), and am very grateful for the opportunity to help individuals and families with what they most need at this time. My advice would be to find someone who has experience, and truly understands the fire recovery process.

Believe

- It is a belief of [Wabi-Sabi](#) that we are always in the process of expanding or contracting. This is an important idea, because so much has been contracted by fire that the belief in the process of expanding now is essential. The idea that what is ahead could possibly be as wonderful as what lies behind us is worth pondering. All that I have outlined so far helped me to stay in the frame of mind of looking forward. This can be challenging, as it is necessary to look backward for contents and structural reconfiguration reasons daily.



An oil painting of a home that barely escaped the flames

A Few Ideas

1. ***Sanctuary and Inspiration:*** Find a sacred place to which you can retreat and recharge. Have a general idea of what your optimal recovery looks like. Write it down; maybe keep a binder with clippings and pictures of the idea or image. This is different than “The Plan,” which is much more formal. I would carry around my personal inspiration board, adding and subtracting to create what was beautiful to me. Not only does this lift your spirits, but it allows for a constant visual reminder of what you truly want and are working every day for.
2. ***Add Education:*** Do a science project on your property. In my case, I enlisted the help of a world-renowned forester from the University of California, Berkeley, who helped me to identify a small area to document the natural recovery of the plants, animals and land. We visited this spot often, and it was encouraging to see what would take place when I did absolutely nothing. Additionally, my children learned many important lessons from being involved in this educational project.

3. **Focus:** The organization tools and rituals which I have outlined in previous posts helped me to stay focused.
4. **Time:** The unspoken value of time is key. As you may imagine, things can get a little messy and confusing as you go through the steps in your plan. In my case, it was important for me to believe that my most important asset was my time. If something was not working, I let it go, and replaced it as quickly as possible with what would work better. Everything can be replaced except time.

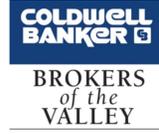


Morning in Sonoma

Success is defined by each individual. I found that after the wildfire recovery was all done, what I had created from the ashes, through diligent repairing, renovating and rebuilding, was indeed more lovely than what had made up my property before the fire. Granted, it is a process, but ultimately, it's a process worth pursuing.

After doing all of the above, I went back to running a successful hospitality venue on my property. Many people from around the world came to visit and enjoy the rest and rejuvenation that this property in the hills of Sonoma offered. Ultimately, I did sell the business and the real estate. It was beautiful, and the land, trees, and animals on it were healthy, so in my mind, it was a success.





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