LIFE & REFLECTION

The Fire This Time:
A Metaphor for 2016

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Lessons from surviving the 1991 Oakland–Berkeley firestorm, offered again for anyone facing sudden change they did not choose.

Twenty-five years ago, my house burned, along with 3000 others, in a huge firestorm that struck the hills of Oakland and Berkeley in the San Francisco Bay Area. It was unexpected – though, in hindsight, it could have been anticipated. It was an event over which I had no control. It changed everything about my life and those of my neighbors. Being a writer and an educator, of course I felt driven to draw lessons from the way all of us responded to this event – to begin to understand how to deal productively with sudden, imposed change. I wrote an article with some ideas about how we were able to get through the difficult days and months that followed the firestorm and published it as part of a manual on change leadership.

Ten years later, after the awful events of 9/11, I revisited and revised the article in response to a client's request for something to offer the people in her company who were so deeply shaken, as we all were, by the experience of watching and living through the terror attacks.

Today, many people in the U.S. and around the globe have been profoundly affected by the upending of expectations in what is usually a predictable series of events leading to the selection of a new leader. While it is a different type of event in most ways from a firestorm or a terror attack, the reactions to it are amazingly similar: shock, anger, grief, fear, confusion, depression. Even for people who voted for the winner, after the initial joyful reaction, there is a sense of concern about unanticipated consequences and potential conflict and division.

So today, I thought I would once again share some of the lessons I learned all those years ago and which have been helpful to me ever since. Here they are.

Let go of any illusions of control or "magical thinking." I believe that consciously letting go shortened the "neutral zone" time for me. Friends who did not do this later reported that they stayed in a suspended state for many days and delayed taking practical actions to recreate their lives. Visualization of a positive future which you can help bring about is productive; imagining that you can control the forces of nature, of the economy, of human nature or global politics is not. Letting go is a conscious choice of "mental action." I found it helpful to use a mental image of letting go, such as opening my hand. Until you are able to do this, you will remain fixed in the past. Time spent reviewing how you or

others could have prevented the disaster or how you might still rescue the situation is not productive. That time is better spent in grieving and then getting on with life after the firestorm. The time for learning how to prevent repetition of the loss will come later in the process when you can make a realistic assessment of what you can control and what you can't.

Take time to grieve, but not more than you need. Two days later, after the fire was out, we were allowed to walk in to see what was left. Although we really knew what we would find, it was a shock to see our neighborhood looking as if it had been bombed out, in a war zone. Our home was gone; in its place a strangely beautiful ruin. We cried and hugged. Then we got out the shovels we had brought and began to dig. There was more grieving to do, of course, but it happened from time to time as a natural part of the work of remembrance, healing, and rebuilding and never after that day was the central focus of our lives.

Celebrate the best of what was lost; bring it symbolically with you toward the future. The first thing I found intact was a plate my grandmother had painted in the 1920s. The glaze a little rearranged but otherwise perfect, it seemed a loving message from the past. Later we found our favorite breakfast mugs, re-cast as multimedia pieces. That night the sunset was especially glorious, almost echoing the fire of two days earlier. The full moon shone at the same time through what had once been our bedroom window. We brought fruit and flowers (for life) and candles (for hope) and had a small, quiet ceremony in which we appreciated all that the house had meant to us, then let it go and made a promise to ourselves to keep that which was best in our hearts until we could build it again.

Visualize a positive future; it does not need to be very specific. The ability to envision a positive future at a difficult time arises from your resources, both inner and outer. Confidence in yourself and those around you to achieve in the face of adversity is both reflected in and stimulated by your vision. Our vision shortly after the fire was not specific but rather a sense that we would find a good way to live our lives until we could rebuild. Much later we began to imagine the kind of house we wanted to build. Having the knowledge that we would be whole again, although changed, helped us through the most difficult time.

Revisit your values and appreciate what you still have. We were all alive and well; things are just things. We were temporarily homeless, but we did not face it as a permanent condition as so many do. It does sound trite now to say that appreciating one's blessings is healing, but we are seldom faced in our fast-moving lives with an opportunity to learn what is deeply important. I was surprised to learn how easily my attachment to things—even wonderful things like works of art and antiques—was overcome.

Empower yourself to take action on your own. I found my energy very focused in the few days after the fire. Because of the excellent support I received from family, friends, and the staff of my company, I was free to find a house to rent, buy necessities, get organized to start living normally again. The more I did things that moved us toward normalcy, the more the vision became realized. After an experience of complete powerlessness, it seems especially important to be active on your own behalf.

Use your energy for building, not blaming. For some time after the fire, there was a great deal of speculation about whose fault it was, as if having someone or something to blame is a necessary part of the healing process. It is not. The immediate cause of the fire may or may not have been someone's carelessness. The more important cause was that people like me choose to live in a part of the world that is prone to wildfires and earthquakes and choose unsuitable building and landscaping material. Energy spent on blaming others for our troubles is not being spent on resolving problems and moving forward. In the case of loss due to hostile acts or personal grievances, focus on blame and retribution rather than developing constructive alternatives can lead to endless cycles of mindless conflict.

Be forgiving toward yourself and others. For several weeks I was aware of being more snappish than usual. I was impatient and irritable with anyone in my way. Knowing that the overheated reactions are temporary helps to keep them from escalating, especially if you can let the recipients know that you are blowing off some steam in addition to being genuinely concerned about the problem. Forgiveness and graceful self-disclosure can help heal important relationships with family, friends, and colleagues at the time you need one another the most.

Make a conscious effort to learn from the experience. Noticing your own reactions in a tough situation is a little like the eye trying to see itself and certainly too much self-consciousness is distracting. Still, at least for people who are always curious and questioning, this kind of experience offers tremendous opportunities to learn. Learning creates meaning and value from an experience that is otherwise painful.

So how do these principles, learned from surviving and thriving after a firestorm, apply to coping with other kinds of changes that seem sudden and are not in one's control – the kinds of changes that inevitably occur in the life of communities, of nations, of organizations and of the people who are part of these entities. The loss of an election, a job, a major contract or customer; a change in mission, leadership or comfortable structures and processes, can feel like an earthquake or fire. The loss of certainty and the temporary loss of faith in the future are losses many people are suffering from as I write, leading to a predictable reduction of productivity and morale. Yet, as resilient people, we will find ways to heal our own wounds and the damage that may have occurred to our relationships during this difficult and disruptive election season. Regardless of how you voted and even if you couldn't or didn't, you can apply the principles I have discussed above both to yourself and to help those whom you care about. A sudden change that causes shock, pain, and loss to many is not unlike a firestorm to those in its path. You can't stop it, but you can survive it; you can even grow and change in unexpected and interesting ways because of it. Fire consumes; it also refines.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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