

THE MINDFUL WORD

by Diana Raab, Ph.D.

Fires to Mudslides and Apocalyptic Feelings

Being a writer and one of the lucky ones to have survived the recent California Thomas Fire and Montecito mudslides, I feel compelled to try to express what others and I are feeling. I've rarely had a difficult time putting my feelings into words, but these two experiences have truly left me scrambling.

I've been receiving inquiries from all around the world about my whereabouts. People are worried and concerned. In fact, most of my day is spent responding to these emails and texts. I'm not complaining; rather, I feel blessed that so many people care about me. I have

band and some workers hours to clean things up; but even so, I was extremely grateful just to have a home to return to. After being home for two days, we decided to leave on a planned December holiday trip east.

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been quick to respond because I also know that, when you put your story out there, in return you become surrounded with love and prayers.

Responding to the inquiries is also a mindless activity, which is helpful right now because I am having difficulty focusing without becoming emotional and distracted. At times, it feels as if rehashing what happened is re-traumatizing; however, my mission in life has always been to comfort others. But there also comes a time, and mine is now, when I need to engage in some self-care and nurturing. I can no longer put my creative efforts into replying to all the queries I've received.

During the Thomas Fire, which began December 4 last year and burned in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties for more than one month, we were in the voluntary evacuation zone; but having asthma and after a week of wearing N95 masks, I was still finding it difficult to breathe both inside and outside the house. Ash the size of snowflakes was falling onto our yard. We finally decided to evacuate to Los Angeles, about 90 miles southeast of the fires. When we returned home a week later, the yard was coated in white ash; and the house – the windows of which we had been told should remain shut – smelled of trapped smoke. It took my hus-

band and some workers hours to clean things up; but even so, I was extremely grateful just to have a home to return to. After being home for two days, we decided to leave on a planned December holiday trip east.

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"Oh my gosh, that's awful!" I exclaimed, and thanked him for coming. I phoned Simon, who was at a business meeting near Los Angeles about one hour away.

"You need to come home. We're being evacuated."

"They're overreacting," he said.

"Well, I'm leaving. You can stay. I don't think they're overreacting if a cop knocked on our door."

"Okay, I'll come home soon," he said.

A few minutes later, Simon called to say he was on his way and would also pack. By the time he arrived, my suitcase and dog were waiting by the back door. Sometimes we just have to follow our instincts; and, as had happened during the Thomas Fire, I knew when it was time to go and when it would be time to return.

I texted my friend Jodi of Jodi G, a local loved interior and landscape designer who lived up the road, that we were leaving. She had not yet been advised of the potential flood risk and she wished us well. We were in the mandatory evacuation zone. She was not, yet her home was one of the 64 that were destroyed. I was deeply relieved to

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learn that she and her husband had eventually evacuated and survived. Three days after the mudslide swallowed her house, she texted me saying, "It's weird not even having a hairbrush."

"I can't imagine," I answered.

That Monday, January 8, I made reservations at a hotel 15 miles north and got the last room. I thought we would only be gone for a few days and packed accordingly. Little did I know that on that night, half an inch of rain would fall in five minutes, causing the deadliest mudslide in California history – a mere month after we had endured the largest fire in state history.

One would think that natural disasters and difficult life experiences would pave a path to contemplation and reflection, but my initial response has been a deep sense of numbness and shock. Some might say that, as people do when faced with any other kind of loss, we bedraggled Californians will go through what the pioneer in near-death studies Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes as the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. We all go through these stages at our own rate, but together they form a framework for how we can learn to live with our losses.

Now, after more than a month of living out of a suitcase, I realize that I had packed for only a few days away, I'm unsure where I am in Kübler-Ross's framework. But I do know that I've not been sleeping and have spent a lot of time crying and wandering aimlessly on walks with my dog at the hotel that I now call home, with so many other residents from our community.

experiencing a tornado of feelings.

People have asked if I and my house are okay, and my response is, "Yes, I am fine. My house is fine, but I cannot celebrate that when so many others have lost their homes and loved ones." My family wonders why I am not happier that my house is intact and why we aren't going back to our part of town where the damage was minimal. I explain that my heart center, which

take time to process. For now, all we can do is be in the moment, count our blessings, and be grateful for the love and support that surrounds us.

In many ways, this experience feels apocalyptic – a rite of passage, a way ultimate moment of transformation? One person asked, "Is it locusts next?" Confusion lurks. Panic attacks awaken me during the night.

I dig deep into my psyche and

My prayer is that my magical community be encircled with love and healing light

We gather for drinks in the hotel bar to soothe our nerves but feel helpless and a deep sense of sadness. We are all heart-wrenched about what has happened to our magical community – that spiritual place where the mountains meet the ocean – and the brilliance and creativity of its people, known ones, such as Oprah Winfrey, Jeff Bridges, Rob Lowe, Ellen DeGeneres, Pico Iyer, T.C. Boyle, the late Sue Grafton and Thomas Steinbeck, and less-known brilliant individuals. I'm mourning for my friends, my colleagues, and my neighbors who lost homes and loved ones in the devastation. I'm

is my guide, is telling me that now is just not the time to go back. How could we drive up our lush driveway and walk into our home running on a generator, when rescuers are still trying to rescue bodies, fix pipes, and make sense of what has happened?

Further, Highway 101, the only port in and out of town, is filled with four feet of mud, and the latest report is that it will be closed indefinitely. The back roads and alternate routes, I've been told, are laden with fallen boulders. At this point, five days after the mudslide, the missing persons are no longer individuals. People who were loved and cherished, whom I've seen about our town in various places, have become dead bodies.

My beautiful friend Jodi, who has created lovely homes that are sanctuaries for those who live in them, is now herself homeless. This woman has brought so much love and light into other people's lives. Just to give you an idea, her Facebook page says, "Love life." She always finishes texts with, "Have a beautiful day." And this morning, she didn't even have a hairbrush.

My question is, "Why?" What is there, if anything, to learn from these experiences? Why and how could this devastation happen to my friend and her husband? Another woman – a pillar of the community in so many realms, from championing human rights to being a board chairman of some of the most prestigious and humanitarian organizations – has also lost her house. The top real-estate agent in the community, Rebecca Riskin, known as "the first lady of luxury real estate," is dead. These are all powerful and influential individuals. Movers and shakers, now stilled. Are we to take away a message here?

At present, we who remain are all working at the survival level. I am aware that this sort of disaster is part of the human journey. It is all part of being a human being, and it will

heart center to see what will help and recall that years ago my spiritual advisor suggested I do a morning check-in. This check-in can be done verbally or in writing. It's a way to categorize and come to grips with chaos. I remind myself and others encountering trauma to ask these questions:

- What is my body feeling?
- What emotions am I feeling?
- What are the messages from my heart?
- What is my soul/spirit feeling?

My spiritual advisor also suggested that, after my check-in, I send a prayer of hope to enjoy the precious day – and to live toward our higher purpose.

So, here goes: Today, my body is feeling confused, but hopeful, my heart is feeling full and open, my mind is feeling analytical, and my soul is feeling like it needs nurturing. And today, my prayer is that my magical community be encircled with love and healing light, and that the people in my community find resilience together to rebuild their lives and expand in joy through the process.

This kind of practice given to me by my spiritual advisor helps me with acceptance and centering. One day at a time. The natural disasters my community has suffered transcend cultural boundaries and political worldviews. Whether we live in a hovel or in a mansion, Haiti or Beverly Hills, and regardless of our race, métier, or level of education, we all need a home that is our sanctuary from the world. When that sanctuary is lost, disorientation and deep suffering ensues. May our own recent tribulations deepen our sense of oneness with those who – although they may seem far removed from us in life – are at the core not that different from us after all."

There's really no other way of looking at it.

Our prayers go out to the victims of the Thomas Fire and Mudslides We Will Rebuild.

We are providing
Free Consultations for:

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