

10 PERSONAL LESSONS FROM WINE COUNTRY FIRES

Two weeks after the first wildfire started its deadly tear through Northern California wine country, we are taking stock of things and wondering “what did we do wrong?” and “what could we have done better?” Today’s post will be more in the nature of a confessional because, in retrospect, we should have been so much better prepared and should have made better decisions throughout the long first week of the fires. As we slowly approach full containment of the numerous fires, here are our initial lessons learned:

We are definitely not Boy Scouts. As most people know, the motto of the Boy Scouts of America is “Be Prepared.” There is no way to sugarcoat this: we were woefully unprepared for a natural disaster of this magnitude and duration. This lack of preparation occurred notwithstanding both of us having worked in the insurance field for over 20 years and having personal and professional experience dealing with devastating natural disasters. One of us currently works for a AAA insurance company and just a few weeks ago participated in a half-day session dedicated to disaster preparation. Our department even put together disaster kits to donate to charity and each of us took a kit home for our families. Embarrassingly, we could not locate the kit when the fires started and found ourselves with no supplies or resources to help us handle a disaster that lasted over a week. By the second day of no power, all of our food was spoiled and we had nothing to eat at home. Most area supermarkets and restaurants were closed as they were similarly impacted by the lack of power.

Solution: create a real disaster kit with water and non-perishable food that can support us for 3-5 days.

Let there be light. Surely it is not an accident that on his very first day of work, God spoke these words: “Let there be light.” For 48 hours, we had no light, nor did we have electricity to power the refrigerator, oven, or power our various devices. As we stumbled around looking for flashlights, we realized that we had none that were operational. For the past couple of years we have been using the “Millennial flashlight” – that is, the iPhone – but ours soon died without electricity for charging. We dug out all the candles we had in the house thinking that, together, they would provide at least enough illumination for one room. This assumption was flawed as the candles were worthless for illumination, although our house had a lovely floral scent.

Solution: load up on flashlights and batteries and keep several charging sticks fully charged and set aside just for emergency purposes.

Forced airplane mode is not cool. Because we had no power at home, our WiFi router was out. Not a problem, we figured, we still have reception through our cellular phone provider. Except, guess what cell towers need in order to function? Electricity. Due to lack of power, many of the towers were out of commission. In addition, even solar-powered towers were knocked out of commission when the fires melted their fiber-optic cables. The result was a total lack of cell service up and down Napa Valley; to reach the outside world we drove each morning up to 10 miles south before connecting to a signal.

Solution: get a satellite phone. We were surprised how easy they are to get and how inexpensive the basic models are.

Failing to plan is planning to fail. Many natural disasters force homeowners to leave their homes and seek shelter away from the danger. In the case of the Napa and Sonoma fires, there are families that are still out of their homes and likely won’t be returning for quite a while. It’s hard enough to plan for a trip whose start and end dates are known, so imagine the trip you start planning at 1:30 in the morning after your neighbor wakes you up and points to two fires burning on either side of the neighborhood. An emergency evacuation offers the added complexity that the travelers may never return to the home again, at least in its intact form. What did we take with us when we left the house after 10 minutes or so of numb scampering about? Just the change of clothes on our backs; nothing for the following day, or following weeks if it were to come to that. No toiletries. No chargers.

Solution: we need a “go bag,” something that has been pre-packed with several days or more of

clothes and other essentials in case we are out of the house for an extended period of time.

Not everything is in the cloud. We have all become accustomed to putting all of our important things “in the cloud,” including all of the pictures that we take on our “Millennial cameras” (also known as smart phones). Certainly, we collectively have thousands, if not tens of thousands, of photos that have been uploaded and are safeguarded in the cloud. Unfortunately, we also have a “real” camera on which we have taken many photos, including many of our children from the way-back time before digital cameras. These photos are not “in the cloud,” they are in photo albums (if you’re under the age of 30, ask your parents what I mean) spread throughout the house and garage. Honestly, we do not even know where all of our treasured photos are located and in the event our house had burned down, they would not be in the cloud but rather “up in smoke.” What other prized possessions are not “in the cloud?” For starters, the novel that one of us has been working on for about 9 years and is on its third draft; this document is saved on an old laptop that was made before “the cloud” existed. Destruction of our house would have been devastating as there would be no way to re-create the thousands of hours of writing. Family heirlooms. Jewelry. Art work from our grandparents that pre-dates World War II.

Solution: First, take all of the old photos and place them in a single location (waterproof plastic tub) so that in the event of evacuation no one has to search for them. Second, create a checklist of precious items so that, in a time of panic, no one has to think about what to prioritize or grab.

Show me your papers. We left behind almost every single important document and paper that we have; the only “official” item we took was our driver’s license. Left behind were our passports, social security cards, hard copies of our federal and state wine importing/selling licenses, deed to the home, and, get this ... our insurance policy information.

Solution: put all the important documents in one location and make sure they are on the evacuation checklist.

Show me the money. When there is no cellular reception, local stores and restaurants will likely have no functioning credit card machines. Cash will be king. We left the house with no cash, other than the 300 in Kuna (Croatian currency) that one of us inexplicably has in (his) wallet since last year’s trip.

Solution: keep enough cash on hand to fund a few days’ eating and lodging and put it in the safe where it will be out of sight and out of mind until needed.

Smoke is bad for you. On day one of the fires, we started seeing people wearing masks as they walked or drove around town. In the beginning, these masks were of the medical variety that doctors and dentists use for basic health and hygiene purposes. By day 3 every store had sold out of the basic mask which, from everything we’ve heard, are not particularly effective. But there are other masks – labelled N95 and N100 – which do more than provide a sheer barrier for smoke. These were also sold out and it took us until a week after the fires started for them to be delivered to the home. These masks are a must for wildfire situations and should be part of everyone’s disaster preparedness kit.

Solution: buy a bunch of masks and put them in the “go bag.”

The age of information can leave you feeling uninformed. We live in the information age, or so they tell us. Once power (and WiFi!) were restored, we were monitoring all of our usual media and information sources and several new ones. A primary source of information was the local news, although we should probably say “local” news. Our news stations are based in San Francisco, 90 minutes away by car. Their knowledge and understanding of our towns, topography, neighborhoods, and geography are limited. We did not glean any real-time critical information from the TV news – such as, how close are the various fires to our house? That would have been nice to know. Our only “local” news is the Napa Valley Register, which has an online edition and a handy mobile app. Unfortunately, news was sporadic at best and by the time we read something in the Register we generally had already heard it somewhere else. Additional sources

of news included Nixle, a site which connects residents and government agencies and facilitates important (including emergency) information via email and text. Social media sites were another source of information – monitoring which friends were evacuating from which neighborhoods. Finally, someone shared a link to the local police scanner which gave us access to some of the freshest information about evacuations and fire location. Despite all of these inputs and data points, though, for almost an entire week we felt dreadfully uninformed and had no sense of how small or large the danger was for our area.

Solution: we're still working on this.

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