

Surviving the Firestorm

By Dr. Carmen Carrillo

It was a typical Sunday afternoon with sports on the family TV and me curled up with a book in the study. Wanting to breathe fresh air, I ambled to the backyard where a warm breeze moved the apple tree branches and felt somehow unpleasant. The sky was an unfamiliar orangish color, and I went back inside to answer the telephone and share my perceptions.

Happy to hear my good friend's voice, I was astonished by her communication. " I don't want to alarm you, but in my hometown of Santa Barbara we are used to the fire danger brought by the Santa Ana winds. We've learned to pack irreplaceable and necessary items in order to evacuate. I think that we may be reaching that point in Oakland, and want to offer you my home if you have to leave." I thanked her, hung up the phone, and went to take a shower and think through the next steps. Once dressed I mobilized the house to decide which items would be essential for work and survival should evacuation be necessary. When I looked out the window I saw various neighbors out in the middle of our street looking up at the sky as perplexed as I felt. Soon a nondescript pick-up truck with a megaphone slowly moved up the street repeating a warning that immediate evacuation was necessary due to the unrelentless fire coming in our direction.

My friend called again and offered to bring her car to help with needed items. And so we loaded up three cars full of photo albums, paintings, work clothes, and documents and caravanned to her house where she made us comfortable with wine and cheese, and left us watching news while she went to the grocery store.

When her phone rang and I answered and offered to take a message, a friendly and sympathetic voice on the other end said: " Oh, are you Dr. Carmen? I am sooo sorry that you lost your house to the fire!" Ice ran through my veins as I heard confirmation of the news the TV map announced by outlining the area where homes had been ravaged by the fire.

By now, my neighborhood had been cordoned off and access prohibited by the police. Phone contact was impossible due to the call volume to fire, police, insurance companies, and other resources.

In the next few days, people gathered in the major streets to assess the direction of the smoke and of the fire. Or perhaps to share the shocking fear that this force, greater than all of us, had the power to upset and change our lives, possibly irreversibly.

Folks murmured, shouted, cried, prayed, and commiserated in a shared cacophony of grief. An organic ecumenical service ensued as the diverse street congregation appealed to customary gods, goddesses, and ancestors, to bestow judgement on the horrible event and allow us to deal with an unknown outcome.

As for me, I rendered tribute to the Four Directions acknowledging the need for Pachamama to stretch, breathe, open and close her crevices and allow shedding of her parts

to make room for new growth. I acknowledged the Hawaiian volcanic Pele, and Aztec fertile Xochil, and implored Chacmol for rain to bathe us in cool water and extinguish the flames. Most privately, I prayed to my birth mother departed to the spirit world: "Mama, you know how hard I've worked for the home which has housed and witnessed our joy, happiness and pain. Please change the direction of the wind. If it continues downhill, our lives will become memories disguised as ashes. I will have to start all over again. If you believe that I need a major lesson in my life, I will accept having to start again, and will do so in your memory."

We were apprehensive when we joined other residents allowed to finally walk towards our homes to assess the damage. Our house stood across the street from a burned-out shell of a formerly lovely house and as we entered it and saw the minimal damage, my tears finally flowed torrentially in gratitude. We paused to thank all of the deities for protecting us, and I silently spoke the words: "Mama, the winds changed their directions. I am home." And then we went to check on neighbors, and began the process of normalization....