

A Reflection on the Cedar Fire – October 2010

Friends,

This week marks the 7th anniversary of the 2003 Cedar Fire that so changed life for Rita and I. At this time of year I always feel so much gratitude for everyone who supported us through the year after that calamity. Periodically, it's good to remember major life events and take note of how their meaning evolves over time.

First of all, thank you. We're doing great. Life and work are moving along just fine. I hope you all are doing wonderfully as well. If I haven't spoken with you in a while, let's make a date to catch up.

The eastern wind is blowing today out here in Alpine, so this seemed like a good time to reflect a little. Below are a couple pages that recap the first days of the 2003 fire, along with some insights about life that formed in the ashes (but took years to solidify). Other fire stories and leadership lessons from 2003-2004 are outlined in the attached if you want to read more.

The Cedar Fire became a visible threat to Peutz Valley in the pre-dawn hours of Sunday 10/26/2003. Karen Dietz and I were in Reno at the time. We were due to present our Free Agent Ecosystem paper to the Institute of Management Consultants annual conference later that morning. Rita, was home, home on the ranch, where the dogs, cats, chickens, and Captain Conundrum (a rabbit with a calico racing stripe) play.

Rita called my hotel at 4:00am: "The horizon is all orange. Fire is coming. Let's go through the check list. I'm going to start packing. How quickly can you get home?"

Karen and I handed our presentation to the IMC conference organizer and said "Here, you present it! We've got to go!" We couldn't get a flight, so we rented a car and drove to San Diego. Twenty hours later, after a brief and restless night at Karen and Tim's house in North Park, I borrowed their pick-up truck and headed to Alpine.

Rita had evacuated to El Centro while I was driving from Reno, and I knew I would catch up with her there before the end of my day. On the way east, I stopped at Costco to buy everything I could think of that a valley would need if it had been decimated by fire: flashlights, beer, tarps, water, food, more beer, ropes, tools, and...well, I loaded the truck.

Circumventing highway patrol road blocks, I took the back roads into Peutz Valley. Upon arrival I saw what a battle field might look like after the cannons go quiet: smoke is everywhere and gray ash turns the world into a grainy black and white movie. Still burning telephone poles and the smoking stumps of once great oaks punctuate the bare and blackened landscape with small plumes of orange flame. The sky is obscured and the sun burns only a dark sepia circle through the haze. Once familiar houses are smoldering black piles. Everyday objects, bicycles, swing sets, row boats, come into view as surreal tangles of bent steel and puddled aluminum. Wires drape across things they shouldn't. It's all wrong.

I come across people in the valley. They are the few neighbors who had stayed to do battle through the fire storm. They all sound fatigued and have bloodshot eyes. There are trails from tears across their soot smudged cheeks, yet they are glad to see a friend come with a reassuring smile and materials from outside.

After surveying our own property, I gathered the few folks I could to talk. Who stayed? How many are still in the valley? Are you alright? What about your house? Your horses? As the sun set on my first trip into the valley, the neighbors and I took nourishment from our fellowship, tepid beer, and chicken grilled outdoors on the spot. We ate quietly as the smoke from everywhere blew across our communal picnic table.

After that unceremonious communion, I drove east over the still burning mountains to El Centro to reunite with Rita in a motel room full of dogs, cats and possessions. In the morning, over truck stop pancakes, we talked about our house which didn't burn, our skills which could be applied, and the needs of our neighborhood. We decided then to open the doors and get to work to do what we could.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Looking back, on that first visit to the valley, I had no idea that in a month's time we would go from being covered in soot every day to being clean and solving problems and coordinating recovery agencies. In that first week, we couldn't envision that three weeks hence we would be joyfully cheek and jowl with 65 neighbors over a Thanksgiving dinner at one 50' long community table in my house. On that first night, we didn't know to count the days to the end of the "disaster phase" and the "clean-up phase" before the long "rebuilding phase".

As things moved along, we were able to articulate visions, restore imagination, count the days of progress, and act to make things better – we worked hard with hundreds of volunteers and agencies and clubs and churches and friends to put things right.

It wasn't an election year, but you can be sure that every political persuasion and religion was represented among the volunteers. We had Evangelical Christians working next to Taiwanese Buddhists. There were politicians on scene next to business people next to US Marines. There were bankers and ranchers, artists and scientists. The only ideology that mattered had to do with working together and taking care of the basics for everyone. I have come to believe that when people are most proud of themselves, that's what they are doing.

In that first month, it was hard to imagine that in seven years we would be retrenched in the comfortable routines of life, seldom thinking any more of those who were lost, and no longer looking for the precious things that were turned to smoke and ash. But, in the recovery we did think about how the fire could be turned into the best thing that ever happened to our valley, and what it would take to make it so. We did act together, over a long time, with your help and resources, to do what we could with that vision in mind. And that consistent vision driven effort, I believe, made all the difference.

Today, if you asked our neighbors (and most from 2003 are still in our valley) whether the Cedar Fire was the best thing that ever happened, they would probably say no it wasn't. What they do say, however, is that the relationships that were created during that recovery time changed what they value about the valley and showed them what's possible when people work together. As proof of that transformation, at least two new neighbors purchased their home in Peutz Valley partly because of that community spirit. Did we turn a disaster into the best thing that ever happened? Close enough for me.

In the crucible of the 2003 fires my jumble of intellectualized values were melted down to basic elements. They were alloyed into four qualities that I aspire to anneal and polish every day: Resilience,

Robustness, Responsibility, and Renewal – I call them the 4R's. A successful life seems to be a product of cultivating these four attributes everywhere I can. For example, I work on a **Resilient** spirit, a **Robust** community, taking **Responsibility** today to create the future we desire tomorrow, and the consistent **Renewal** of assumptions, friendships, knowledge and skills.

I am grateful to you, my friends, for helping me work the 4R's, and for the work that we do together to make things right wherever we can. I am thankful for the joy I feel in our fellowship when we are together, and especially so at this time of year when the east wind blows.

As ever,
Joe Sterling