



WHAT IS TO GIVE LIGHT MUST ENDURE BURNING

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We woke up that morning early and happy, and lay in bed tasting the first sweet fruits of leisure after a long job finally done. The night before we had finished the last painful task of sanding and oiling the floors of the house we had spent every moment and ounce of energy over the last seven months building. The bone-weary two-hour drive back to Portland for it bath, collapse into bed and dreams of the next morning's final trip with our belongings out to the house were behind us. The phone interrupted our pleasant musings. It was Kip.

Our house had burned down.

No. It can't be. We were just there twelve hours ago. It was fine. It was solid. It was beautiful. It couldn't just vanish like that. The house has burned up. All of it? Some of the walls are still there, but it's a total loss. What caused it? They don't know.

What has gone haywire with our world? Fred, our neighbor and dear friend on the mountain dies suddenly on the way back to our house in Portland. Now, exactly a month later, our house burns down – *the morning after we finish it*. No reason, no cause, just gone. Get to the end. Don't take a breath. Go back to ground zero. Now we know how Sisyphus feels. What next?

How do you feel when you're bone-weary and just sitting down and someone kicks the chair out from under you? Cheated? Bewildered? . . . Exhausted. Sometimes you decide to just lay there a while until you can get the energy to get up.



Numbness is a blessing. It keeps the pain away until you can find the strength to deal with it. How do you feel? Numb. In a strange way, lighter and freer. You feel somehow the release of those bondages that each of your possessions has on you. You have unexpectedly the opportunity and responsibility to rethink a lot of things and remake a lot of choices. You really have to *begin* again. Seven and a half months of our lives – gone – up in smoke. It's not until much later that we really realize that it's no different from any other seven and a half months of our lives, which are equally as gone, yet with fewer satisfactions and rewards. Maybe it's the sense of having to *repeat* it that weighs most heavily. All that work and all that love – but now just a rerun. Hopefully we can find ways to turn the rebuilding into a new and also rewarding experience.

We follow a logging truck most of the long drive out to the coast. There are rainbows in the spray from its wheels leading us on. Bizarre, but somehow comforting. On the way we think of the things that were there, and say goodbye to each. What things we later put! from the ashes intact have become gifts. and will be greeted with cheers as well as tears.

We finally start up the last stretch of road and brace ourselves for what floodgates the reality of the charred hulk will open. It doesn't. Still numb. Kip and Amy meet us. They had to watch it burn – to see Kip's beautiful shingling turn to smoke and be sucked up into the cloud capping the mountain. At least they burned well. Where do you get the strength to pick around in the ashes of a newborn child you have just brought into this world through long months of loving labor? Where do you get the strength to look at the left-behind body of a dear friend? Sometimes you don't have the strength, but those things don't go away. They just wait there until somehow or somewhere you do find the strength. You have to, somewhere.



It's hard, but good. Death, tragedy and loss are all parts of life that our society does its best to hide, cushion, mask or deny. You read of tragedies every day in the papers, but it's just the statistics, the outer carcass of what happened. No sense of how people's lives were affected, no sense of what it meant or felt or changed. An always distant-kept, abstract thing. Those realities, though difficult, add some sort of completeness to our lives, and knowing that we have the strength to deal with such things and that we grow through the process is a strength in itself.

We hear a truck racing up the road and turn to see a pickup charging in the driveway. They see us, slam on their brakes and back down the road as fast as they came. Looters. My blood boils. Kip says the fire crew warned him to stay at the house just because of that. There had been several others.

It is strange walking through something so transformed, strange what you latch onto, what brings laughter among the tears and pain. Light bulbs melted into taffy. A dozen now well-cooked eggs on the kitchen floor. Beans starting to sprout on the charred kitchen counter. Pages of a Doonesbury book blowing about in the breeze.

Broken glass by the bushel. Blobs of aluminum, melted off the foil-faced insulation. Vibrant technicolor views of the world going on about its business, framed in the black velvet mask of char. Everything is black. Beautiful patterns of charred wood. The stench of a smoldering mattress. The woodstove – proud, intact, already rusting. Two cords of firewood, now pre-masticated. The detective games begin-what in the world was *this*?

Lane finds the charred remnants of a jewelry box under a piece of now ghostly white insulation. Inside, her great grandmother's face stares up at her from a locket. We find a patch of golden, untouched floorboards only two feet from the center of the fire, and discover that the solder on a water pipe had melted, pouring water right into the middle of the fire. Poor house – it did its best to save itself.

Our new neighbors arrive and help us load what we could salvage into our truck. We joke because one of the things we went back to Portland for was a smoke detector – but it wouldn't have helped, only burned up like everything else. We apologize for the sad state of our housewarming. What else can you say? The neighbors are wonderful – arriving with pots of stew, offers of houses to stay in, help in getting our property taxes adjusted – but mostly to share with us and bring the knowledge that they are there for help if we need it.

In a small town things are more tightly connected – for better or worse. The head of the fire crew had delivered the concrete for our foundations, and we talk about the fire later while pouring the floor to finish the garage that Fred was building when he died. Somehow that helps. The mayor, the owner of the local lumberyard, the people who installed the water main all helped put out the fire. People offer to help us clean up the debris.



That night the more difficult learning begins. With darkness our vulnerability becomes more visible. That thin veil of predictableness that usually shields us from the writhing chaos of creation and destruction has twice been rent asunder. No longer can we consider ourselves immune – unfathomable events are no longer something that happen to someone else. Unanswered questions, the conjurings of battered and exhausted minds, keep us awake. We sleep with our clothes on, and as close to the ground as we can.



More amazing things happen. Marcia sends out a package of things she thought we might need. Without knowing what we'd lost, she sends wonderful replacements for many of our most cherished things. Mary Jo gives Lane a white sweater she just knitted for herself – not knowing that Lane's favorite white sweater burned up. People we'd just met once knock on the door and give us an envelope with \$50. Amy gives me some of Fred's clothes. It's good wearing our friends. Somehow the people level is so much more meaningful than the institutional one that is such a poor substitute for love and caring and sharing and understanding and helping and being vulnerable just like us.

Any sense that we understood what happened was shattered some weeks after the fire while we were spending an evening with friends recently moved to Oregon from Philadelphia. Well into the evening Pauline hesitates, then announces that she had had a vision six months before that our house would burn – on February 8 – but that we

would be all right. She didn't know of our new house and thought it was the Rainhouse, but had written it all down in her journal.

As with Fred's death, we found that sharing our experience with others really helped. Their reactions, shared fears, and past experiences all helped make more whole our own. We discovered that many of us have a common "homecoming fear" – that turning that last corner we would discover our home burned, ransacked or recipient of some other dreadful quirk of fate. We did, and we're okay, and we know that fear will never have the same hold on us again. We learn of cancer victims who have been abandoned by all their friends who don't know how to deal with sickness and death. We remember the same feelings in ourselves, and know now that the best thing is to plunge in, be honest that we don't know what to do or say, and a good way will open. There's no right way.

Amy felt that our losing our house was as bad as her losing her husband. We said no – the house was only an object, and could be rebuilt. She said yes – but her life could be rebuilt, too. We have all been more able to let out our fears of death, of losing each other, and that release seems to lessen them. We are learning to appreciate and enjoy what is part of our lives while it is there and not put off for tomorrow. We've learned more forcefully of the impermanence of all things. A house built to last a lifetime lasts but a single night. Will we build so carefully again? No. More carefully. We've learned that the best we have is the capacities that we carry within us and the love we can share. All else grows out of that and pales beside it.

We've discovered that we only want valued things around us – things that are attachments, that attach us through associations, memories and love to the people, places and events that give meaning to our lives.

We've become more thoughtful about acquiring things. Although we had some insurance which will help us rebuild, we know that the real insurance – the generosity and love of friends, family, neighbors and community – are there if needed. Although we were taught to be self-reliant growing up, we've learned that voluntary dependence, being able to receive, and the value of giving to both the giver and recipient are often of greater value than toughing through alone. We feel stronger, older and more humble.



A week after the fire we began to plant trees. Somehow, carrying those green, fragile, living things through the black charred ashes began to make it all right. We tried to tear the hulk down this weekend and begin again. We couldn't do it yet, but we will, soon.

-Tom Bender