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Viewpoint Section

That Which Never Changes
by Nicole Pugh

As of the time of this writing, the fires of October, 2007 have, for the most part, been contained. Houses that have been lost are being assessed. Many, in time, will be rebuilt. Individuals and families that lost their homes, incomes or aspects of their physical health are, hopefully, on the journey to receiving the assistance and care that they need. And the mass of Southern Californians who long for “normalcy” to return may eventually get their wish—at least on the surface. And yet, even a year from now, in those rare moments of stillness that creep in to the daily grind of our very adult lives, we may get a whiff of something in the air. We may sense, for just a second, the significance of the shift in the atmosphere that this historic event has made. Something is very different than it was in September, 2007. The sights, sounds, emotions and experiences of the fires have been breathed in with the smoke and ash, changing our collective experience.

Some people balk at making comparisons between the fires and other natural disasters that have occurred during the last five to ten years. Others make over-inflated assessments in terms of quality of service and behavior of individuals. As a survivor of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and a person who practices (with varying degrees of success) to see the deeper meaning behind every circumstance in life, I can’t help but see this event within a larger context.

In August of 2005, I left the city of New Orleans as Katrina barreled its way towards Louisiana. We woke up at three a.m., packed our things, packed the car, packed the kids, and joined the slowly moving snake of traffic on the highway towards Slidell. My friend’s eight-year-old son was sitting next to me in the car. He pointed out the birds that were flying overhead.

“They are fleeing too,” he said. I had seen this particular kind of bird flying at dusk across the sky over the Mississippi on many occasions. Normally, they fly in a straight vee-formation. On this particular day, however, they bulleted around pell-mell like scattering ants. The sight of them told me that something significant was on its way.

Fast-forward to day two of the fires. I was at my parent’s house in Vista, California. Suddenly, I stopped what I was doing and looked outside. A large, black mass was descending upon the grass in the back yard. It was a gaggle of ravens, no less than 20. They landed with massive precision and squawked and pecked for about a minute. Then they were gone. I have never seen so many of them descend with such organization. I stood dumb-founded at the window for a long time after they were gone. There are signs from nature as to the pulse of the planet at any given time and they can be found everywhere—in backyards, in the sky, even in our dreams (see feature article, Snow Goose).

On day three of the fires, my parents flew back from vacationing in Lake Tahoe in case of evacuation. The next day, my father and I visited the just-established El Camino High School Evacuation Center in Oceanside. By the time we arrived, the center was full to capacity, mostly by people fleeing the fires in Fallbrook. I spoke with Jose’ Banda, Deputy Superintendent for the Oceanside Unified School district and Tim Ware, OUSD

School Intervention Manager. The school district had begun planning with city officials early in the week to prepare for possible opening of the shelter. At the time I visited, the care that had gone into the shelter was evident and it was full to capacity. I also met with volunteers Sue Bergdahl and Carolyn Puga.

“I had to do something,” explained Puga. The comments and dedication of the people at El Camino High School reminded me of a similar statement made by the dozens of people—FEMA workers, Red Cross volunteers, everyday folks—who opened their homes and their hearts for me and my loved ones in 2005.

I have been accused at times of seeing the world through “rose colored glasses.” However, through first-hand experience with two of the biggest natural disasters and evacuations in our nation’s history, the single thread that I see that runs through all of these events is the ever-present opportunity that they provide for connection—people to people, people with the Earth, and the Earth with the myriad of living creatures and organisms that inhabit this her.

We human being take the experiences of our lives in like water and assimilate them into our essence every day. As a result, our cells are imbued with a deeper color and the heart travels within the body in a slightly different space. Akin to experiences of birth and death, the fires of 2007 changed us because they brought us closer to that which is, on one level, beyond our control. The golden nuggets in the middle of the chaos, however, are the decisions we make within that space, when we for a split second, are brought just a little closer to that which never changes—the ever-present pulse of love and life in all its forms.

Nicole Pugh is editor of Vision magazine.