

A Year of Reflections on Leadership, Community, and Fire

by Joe Sterling

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Summary

We are approaching the first anniversary of the devastating 2003 wildfires that swept through San Diego County. During the last twelve months I have reflected on the fire and fire recovery experience and have attempted here to organize my notes and many stories of leadership, community and fire.

Along the way, my wife Rita and I have been given the KGTV Channel 10 Leadership Award, the Alpine Chamber of Commerce ALPS Humanitarian of the Year Award, and acknowledgements from the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, State Senate, and Congress for our contributions. At some point I had been asked if I would write some remarks on leadership, so the following is a humble effort to draw some useful lessons from this year's experiences.

I feel somewhat self-conscious about describing the various things we did. Mostly, I am simply grateful to have survived the fire, and to have been given so much including the opportunity to serve such wonderful people. Having said that, it is my most sincere desire that our experiences may inspire others in some way to participate in their community and engage in leading where leadership is needed. I would hope that we become more tolerant of each other, and less tolerant of the smallness that keeps us isolated from one another. I would hope that we become less comfortable or willing to accept short-term gains at the expense of long term economic, social, and environmental vitality and security in our community.

As for leadership, it is such an intangible notion. It has different meanings to different people. To complicate matters it is situational. The circumstances of the moment will demand more or less from those involved in leading and those looking for leadership. People, in turn, will have more or less competence and commitment to succeed in their role for the moment as leaders and followers.

The Leadership Challenge by James Kouzes and Barry Posner (1995, Jossey-Bass) presents five of the practices demonstrated by effective leaders (there are many more, but these five are a good starting point). The five practices include: challenge the process; inspire a shared vision; enable others to act; model the way; and encourage the heart.

To this I would add: build tools and places that make these practices easy and natural. This entails a welcoming physical place for people to meet, share and store information, and dialogue, make decisions, and grieve or celebrate. Community and leadership behaviors happen in a place, the architecture of which either facilitates or hinders.

If you want leadership and collaborative behaviors, back them up with structures that make those behaviors easy, and miracles can happen. My wife, Rita, and I did our best to encourage leadership behaviors in everyone that stepped up, and to

focus care and attention onto those who could not. Our “barn”, outfitted for creative and collaborative group meetings, did its part to make community and leadership easier. The fundamental question that planners and individual land developers will have to work out is: Are we designing and building for community relationships to spontaneously happen or are we building for isolation. I believe the latter is the trend we are suffering under environmentally, socially, and economically.

I’ve tried to write a simple description of how Kouzes and Posner’s clearly articulated behaviors played out in our lives since October 2003, but it is a longer article than you will find in the newspaper. The longer more reflective version of this story follows after this summary.

What I can say in a few words is that the easiest part of bringing these leadership practices to life was making the decision to do so. After the fire, it was not something my wife, Rita, and I had to think much about. We simply let our hearts tell us what was right and necessary. It was obvious to us that the same was true for most everyone we came across. Lead or contribute in some way was the natural response to the circumstances.

I experience that urge to step forward and act coming from a very deep human place. It’s not about risk, reward, or reason. It’s more about what we knew when we were children about feeling the pain of a fellow child. Or, as an adult, the motivation we feel to care for a lost and scared child. The leadership practices, I’ll describe in more detail later, initially become the tools for expressing that most visceral intent to make things better. Beyond alleviating the pain of the moment, leadership practices become a vehicle to get us all to a better place, a place that expresses the best of what humans can be and create individually and together. It’s a place that is full of life that your body can feel, and it gets better year to year, decade to decade.

Paradoxically, the more trying the times, the easier it is to step up to leading. The more comfortable we are and the more resources we have the harder it is to risk for the common good. Perhaps this is why there are so few movies about truly wealthy people doing the kind of spectacular good in the world that their billions could accomplish overnight.

Leading is not about perfection that’s for sure. After the fire, I fell down, lost patience with nearly everyone, and made many mistakes (most more than once). I did, however, have the occasional sublime moment of clarity and effectiveness. The clearer the directive of the heart to serve, the more mental and spiritual resources become available, and the less one cares what others think. It becomes easier to “fail faster forward.” Look to the heart first, all the rest follows.

If I were to offer a just four lessons I learned from the classroom of the 2003 firestorm that anyone could apply it would be these:

First, to quote my mother, a retired physician, **“Stay cheerful and resourceful in the face of adversity. Get the job done now, there will be time for hysterics later.”** You just do what you have to do. Connecting this to our leadership practices, in order to sustain leadership, one also has to remember the other side of the coin. It is critical to take time away from the fray to recharge, process one’s feelings, and reflect on the lessons of from the heat of the moment.

Second, to quote an old mentor, **“Show up and add value.”** Leaders don’t just

show up and spew ideas, visions, and directives. Any fool can do that, and too many do. To deliver on the “add value” part requires a willingness to do *anything* that will make a positive difference. In the post-fire world of Peutz Valley, this meant everything from buying dinner for 50, to opening the doors of our home to the community (and keep them open), to consoling a man whose wife had died in the fire, to face our neighbor’s anger and disappointment by telling them what they had to do for themselves. It’s much more about being present to hear and feel someone’s need than any kind of role. It is specifically about looking around for what needs to be done, that no one else is doing, and getting on with it.

Third, it is critical to **think through the relative importance and urgency** of the myriad things one could do. The goal, of course, is to stop doing unimportant things, whether they are urgent or not, and begin doing things that are progressively more important. To the extent that the most urgent and important things are accomplished, pain and drama diminishes. To the extent that one can work on the important/non-urgent, the sense of safety, security, and control returns and can be strengthened. It takes tremendous will and focus to return to the non-important/urgent after solving some urgent thing that has popped up. There are many demands placed on leaders by people in the grips of fear to focus on highly urgent matters that are usually the byproduct of not working the important issues when they were non-urgent. Stephen Covey’s book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People presents this model in more detail and clarity.

Lastly, as 9/11 Chaplain, Ray Junta told us, **“While most folks will recover in a period of months, you will need to bring special kinds of support to those who will take years to recover. They will likely be the folks who were struggling before the disaster.”** As a group works through disaster recovery, there will be a small percentage that doesn’t seem to climb up out of it with the rest of the affected population. I think of this like a flock of geese migrating south in the winter. If 95% of the flock are gaining altitude and getting underway, should they redirect all of their resources toward the 5% that are not? This poses a very difficult challenge for leaders helping a population rise from the ashes of a major disaster.

When the disaster is fresh, everyone is in marginal condition and traumatized. Within a few weeks, the majority climbs up at roughly the same rate, but a few seem to be struggling and lagging behind. Leaving these folks in trauma is not an option; so, they need a different kind of support than most. In our valley there have been some true victories in this regard where folks who were struggling before the fire, with the support of the community and relief agencies, are now able to use the fire experience to boot-strap themselves into a better life.

These are a small handful of lessons on the kind of leadership that we did our best to express as we recover from the October 2003 fires. As the Alpine community recovers, and comfort returns, the kind of leadership needed will change.

My friend and client, Ray Patchett, City Manager of Carlsbad, said, “We find out what people are really made of when they are faced with a crisis.” I agree, and we certainly saw the heart and sinew of so many folks after the fire. When it comes to community leadership, I believe we will see what our community leaders are really made of when there is no crisis. The truly effective leaders among us will step up, risk, and do what must be done, not because there is immediate danger or payoff, but because they can see the health, sustainability, and abundance that can manifest in the years of relative peace and quiet.

Introduction

It cannot be overstated, leadership is an intangible notion. It has different meanings to different people. To complicate matters it is situational. The circumstances of the moment will demand more or less from those involved in leading and those looking for leadership. People, in turn, will have more or less competence and commitment to succeed in a situation as leaders and followers. And, by the way, both the situation and the people will change over time. So, where does one begin to talk about leadership?

Let's start talking about leadership with a story of fire, destruction, lives torn apart, and the process of recovery and renewal. To organize the telling of our story, I'd like to show it to you through the leadership lens provided by James Kouzes and Barry Posner in their book The Leadership Challenge (1995, Jossey-Bass). Kouzes and Posner's "Ten Commitments of Leadership" is acknowledged by many in the business world as one of the best descriptions of the practices and commitments of great leaders. I'm sure that the literature on community leadership has slightly different emphases, but I bet that the fundamentals are the same. Since I'm familiar with this model, I'll project our community leadership experience through it. I invite interested parties to help me contrast the differences between this and other models, perhaps ones better suited to community issues, over coffee any time.

Ten Commitments of Leadership

Kouzes and Posner's "Ten Commitments of Leadership" is organized into five leadership practices, each made up of two specific behaviors. You may think of other behaviors that could be added to this model, or shift the emphasis to make up your own definition of leadership. You'll find I've included some highlights that don't fit the model perfectly, but do make additional points on leadership. The important thing is to sort out a set of leadership definitions that are effective for the community in which you live or work, and to talk with others about the distinctions. To start our dialogue on leadership we can use the following and customize from there.

PRACTICES

BEHAVIORS (COMMITMENTS)

Challenging the Process

1. **Search out** challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate and improve.
2. **Experiment**, take risks, and learn from the accompanying mistakes.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

3. **Envision** an uplifting and ennobling future.
4. **Enlist** others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes, and dreams.

Enabling Others to Act

5. **Foster collaboration** by promoting cooperative goals and trust
6. **Strengthen** people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support.

Modeling the Way

7. **Set the example** by behaving in ways that are consistent with shared values.
8. **Achieve small wins** that promote consistent progress and build commitment

Encouraging the Heart

9. **Recognize** individual contributions to the success of every project.
10. **Celebrate** team accomplishments regularly.

Do Your Own Thinking About Leadership

So that these notes may be instructive, and hopefully inspiring, consider how you demonstrate the leadership practices highlighted here. What examples have you witnessed, or wish you had witnessed, in the leaders with whom you have lived, worked, or played? What other leadership behaviors do these stories bring to mind? What leadership qualities do you look for in the "official" leaders of your community? Make notes of your ideas and responses. I find that writing down my dreams and decisions for future behaviors makes them come to pass all the faster. Talk with others about these distinctions and compare notes. Fostering the dialogue about leadership distinctions is, in fact, a leadership act.

For my part, the actions I describe in the following pages were the best I could do in the situations I created and in which I found myself. In writing up my journal notes some moments seem to expand in detail while others get somewhat more of a broad-brush description. I think of the results that Rita and I witnessed and contributed to during the months following the fire not as our demonstration of leadership, but as the synergistic byproduct of all the roles that we, and the members of our community, played and traded. Leaders are only leaders to the extent that the community grants them permission to focus people's attention and energy toward a future. It takes the leader and the led working in concert to create the "more" than either could do individually.

Lest we think that leaders today will be leaders tomorrow, it is critical to remember that leadership is usually situational. An old friend of mine used to say, "The job is the boss, and knowledge is the leader." The point is that in a given situation, success will come when the group allows the most knowledgeable person to step forward and point the way.

As you read and think about what you would have done in these situations, I hope you can learn from the mistakes I made along the way. I suspect that readers who have lived through war, man-made-mishap or natural disaster will recognize all the leadership dynamics presented here. In the reflection and writing of my experience, I hope to learn how to be a better human, a better neighbor, and as the need arises, a better leader. I challenge you to do the same as you read and reflect on these stories. With that let us turn to our example from the 2003 wild fires.

Our Story Opens...

My wife and I are members of a small rural community called Alpine in the foothills 30 miles to the east of San Diego, California. In October of 2003 wildfires swept through San Diego County burning 400,000 acres, destroying 2,200 homes, and taking the lives of 22 people. It was the worst wildfire in Southern California history.

The fire came to our rural neighborhood, Peutz Valley, on October 26, traveling 50 miles per hour on the Santa Ana winds. Eyewitnesses report that our whole valley was ignited in less than 10 minutes. It proceeded to burn for days thereafter until we had lost 91 structures, which displaced 51 families.

During the first 24 hours a few courageous men and women, all residents who had been trapped or chose to stay in the valley as the fire swept through, did what they could to save homes and property. Among these few there was more heroism than we will ever know or acknowledge. In the smoky wake of the fire, I, and others, went back to see what remained, began cleaning up and started making sense of what had happened.

I returned to the valley for the first time 36 hours after the fire had passed through. Much of what could burn had burned. Many trees, power poles, and some houses were still on fire. The majority of the old sycamores and most of the old oak trees were still there. The ubiquitous chaparral and sagebrush that covered our hills with bone-dry fuel was all gone. Hidden land contours I had never seen before were now naked. There was no more mystery about the shape of things. Smoke was drifting everywhere like a charcoal fog.

Driving into the valley I traversed a black and gray landscape punctuated by periodic lazy orange plumes where the remnants of trees still burned. Our blacktopped road was covered with gray ash disturbed by only a few dark tire tracks where others like me had driven slowly, struggling for a glimpse of something they recognized, and a hint of comprehension. The few men I encountered as I made my way into the valley were covered in gray, working with their tractors to clear the road. Red bandanas added strength to these ashen-faced men moving fallen trees and debris to the side of the road. Color photos of the initial scene taken in the amber October sun captured a sepia tone world without greens or blues.

As luck and grace would have it, our home and offices in a converted barn had survived the fire. Though lumber piled just a few feet from the building was reduced to ashes, and landscaping right under the eaves was still smoldering when I arrived, the structure was essentially undamaged. One of the family cats that had been too frightened to evacuate with Rita, but instead hid under the bed, emerged upon my

Leadership Behavior: "Set the Example"

The neighborhood men and women who worked during and immediately after the firestorm to save the homes and property of their neighbors were modeling leadership for all who followed. They kept their heads, focused on the work at hand, made the best of limited resources, and took care of each other. They encouraged firefighters to come into the valley and participate, even though it would mean the firefighters would have to break ranks with the chain of command that had ordered them to stay out of the valley. These valley residents faced tremendous personal danger, and worked very long and hard to save as much property as possible.

return as if nothing had happened. During the fire our garden outbuilding had been destroyed in which our pet rabbit and chickens had not been so lucky.

It was, and remains, hard to believe that our building didn't just explode like so many other structures just a few hundred yards away. At our next door neighbor's house the fire was so intense that it melted all the aluminum off his race boat engine and caused the steel frame of his pick-up truck to sag between the burned out tire rims. We found the remains of our own camp trailer, which had been parked in the pasture on our property

For our old wooden barn to have survived meant a number of things. The building's survival meant that we, unlike many of our neighbors, had a place to sleep and still had all of our belongings (at least those that were inside the building). It also meant that we had a tool to use to support our neighbors.

It's important to mention that our building is outfitted to support our consulting services on the ground floor including tools conducting seminars and collaborative group events. Our business involves facilitating organizations, mostly large corporations and some governments, to build scenarios of plausible (and sometimes outrageous) futures. We then guide them to explore the implications of those scenarios, design responses and make decisions about how to succeed in whatever future unfolds. Our professional skills predisposed us to be helpful in this kind of crisis, but with the added benefit of our intact toolkit and facility we had a very good shot at really helping people. We had no idea of the ride we were about to take, but we knew that our skills and tools gave us at least a starting point for coping and helping others.

After a quick survey of the property to ensure that the building wasn't on the verge of going up, I decided that the best thing I could do immediately for the neighbors was to open the doors, bring people together, and provide a place to sit, eat, drink, talk, cry, laugh and simply be humans together.

In spite of the smoke and ash everywhere, I dragged out the gas bar-b-q and set up for a cook out. Since there was no electricity, water, or phone service, a cookout was the only way we would get a hot meal into folks without leaving the valley to find it.

I had loaded up a truck that I borrowed from a San Diego friend on my way out to the valley with all kinds of water, food, ice, coolers, tools, and safety equipment that I imagined needing when I got to the valley. Once offloaded, I made a quick tour of the valley to find others who would surely need a meal, a beer, and a chance to sit down.

Leadership Behavior:
"Search out challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate and improve."

Five months prior to the fire, Rita and I invited our neighbors to meet at our home to try to understand the range of issues facing our community, in particular we were interested in the implications of development of new housing subdivisions being planned for tracts on the north side of the valley. Neither of us knew much about the process of how developments get planned and implemented, nor did we know about how a group of concerned property owners could organize, collaborate, develop a shared vision, and influence that process. Even more important, we didn't know our neighbors.

Our first act to learn and reach out was to develop a directory of our fellow valley residents. This was a real stretch since many people questioned our motives for getting their names and numbers into a document. We knew we needed a directory if we were to get people involved. We had no idea how useful it would become before the fire hit.

Neighbors, mostly those who had stayed to fight the fire, began arriving. As they did, you could see in their eyes how tired and traumatized they were. All were covered in ash from 36 hours of non-stop effort. It didn't take long to find several people who then invited others. As they began to arrive, one of the most powerful leadership moments I have ever witnessed happened. As of this writing, I doubt the leadership experience was about me, or them. I believe it was about "Us."

As I began to find folks who needed a break, I realized that there would be something symbolic about coming together for the first time as a group, a family of people, to do something normal like grill some chicken and sausages. As our neighbors began to come, they asked, "What can I do?" So, I gave them simple tasks. "Set up that table." "Why don't you clean the ash off those chairs." "Would you kindly light the grill and pull the chicken out of the cooler." In this moment, neighbors who had never met each other began to work together doing something simple, archetypical, and nurturing.

As they received the simplest direction in the preparation of that first meal, and sat down, I could see the gravity of the scene lift from their shoulders. It was as if the light in my neighbor's eyes had been turned back on as a result of hearing the slightest bit of calm compassionate direction. For the moment they didn't have to worry about their situation. Someone could see what needed to be done and simply told them to do it. It seemed to reboot the order of things in the midst of profound chaos.

Leadership Behavior:
"Achieve small wins that promote progress and build commitment."

As seemingly insignificant as preparing a meal together may seem, taking the process of life back from the fire was a small but powerful victory. While it was happening, we said it was like being at a beach bonfire party, where everywhere you sat was downwind from the fire. Getting smoke in your eyes was just part of the experience.

The silliness of sitting around in the smoke having a bar-b-q was strange and funny that it became healing in a weird way. We laughed between crying about what had happened and busied ourselves with the meal. Several of us got to meet each other for the first time over this initial meal. It was meeting another human being in a way that one very rarely does under normal circumstances. Shaking the hand of a newly met neighbor in this context really meant something. It said "WE ARE HERE. We made it. We're in this together."

These small victories of the heart forged a family, a team, a neighborhood, right then and there. The commitment to support one another, germinated by dragging out the bar-b-q for a smoky dinner, flourished vibrantly for months. This was easily felt while we worked through the initial emergency and clean up phases of recovery. Other events built on this. And each time a small victory was achieved we did our best to hold that up as evidence that we could, and would continue to, beat this thing that had taken so much from us.

How do you respond when you feel the grip and hear the call to serve?

The first few hours in the valley, and that evening bar-b-q experience, put so many aspects of my life into stark relief and raised important questions. What's the most important thing Rita and I could do? What about our business? The electricity was out, why didn't I get that solar panel put in yet? I feel so sad as I look at all this devastation, and boy am I glad our place didn't burn! It will take a long time to put

this all back together. There are many things that will never be the same.

I was shocked and trying to cope. In what seemed like slow motion, I drove the truck out of the valley in the dark. I passed the state troopers in Alpine who let me get onto Interstate 8 and head east. I motored as fast as I could past the burning hills at Hwy 79 and across the desert to El Centro to find Rita in a motel with our pets and so many other refugees from Alpine. She had evacuated the day of the fire in her sedan with our dogs and one of two cats. She had gathered up the business documents, and a handful of our most precious belongings. Her car could only hold so much. Most of our important things were left behind and would have been burned if the house had gone up. During the two-hour drive my mind was racing with issues, options, and questions.

I located the motel and found Rita awash with the family animals and our stuff all jammed into a tiny room with a giant bed. We were so relieved to be together again, safe and whole. I remember a fitful night's sleep, but felt so relieved.

In the morning, over pancakes and orange juice, we talked and overheard the same conversation coming from tables all around us. What was left? What do we do now? Did you hear from so and so? Over breakfast that morning we added up our resources, considered options, and decided to do the best we could to serve our community. We didn't know what that would demand of us, or for how long, but we did know that we would open our doors and start.

Upon our return to the valley and roaming the property together, Rita and I got a start on what we would need to just get ourselves set up to live there again. The list making began.

- Our new generator would have to be hooked up
- The plumbing for our well would have to be replaced and connected to the house.
- No water meant there would be no showers or working toilets. This meant showering at friend's homes and having PortaPottis delivered.
- Phone lines were all burned down, so we would have to start making cell phone calls from the top of the hill by care where we could get reception to start telling worried friends and family the extent of the damages and the kind of help we would need.
- We would have to reactivate our satellite delivered backup Internet service.
- Food and water needed to be brought in starting immediately.
- The dangerous debris and still burning trees would have to be cleared up.
- The dead chickens and rabbit would have to be buried.
- On top of that we would have to start thinking about how to get the

Leadership Behavior:

"Submit To The Grip Of Courage"

As my father would say, "Courage means taking action in the face of doubt." What way we would act we didn't know, but act we would. I felt in my gut, in my bones, that if ever there was a moment when the community needed us, this was it. There were a few things that were obvious to do, like get some basic supplies into the valley and set up some meeting times to do problem solving. I knew we would need these basic infrastructure elements to get anything done at all. In retrospect, the impact of my visit to the valley the day before didn't hit me consciously, but gripped me by the spine and catapulted me toward service. The conversation with Rita over breakfast in El Centro was more of an acknowledgement of what I *would* do than a negotiation about what could be done. In that respect one can think of leaders as people who submit to the grip of courage around their backbone to act, rather than marshalling something consciously to get them to move forward. If courage is taking action in the face of doubt, the grip that steels the spine is that energy which enables the courageous to act.

community organized so they could help themselves and us in the process.

By the third day of working in the smoky haze, Rita and I had enough of our essentials covered to start thinking about community meetings. We spread the word in the valley that there would be a community meeting and that all were invited. Folks rolled in, covered with ash, looking shocked and afraid, tired and hungry. Those first meetings were all about who is here, who needs what, and does anyone know what happened to so and so. We printed piles of the valley phone directory and started getting them updated with temporary numbers. At every meeting we took a moment of silence to say a prayer for those who had died, and for strength to do what we needed to do. We told stories of where we were when it happened and what we did. We made lists. We ate together. We shook hands, hugged, laughed as we could, and cried when the sorrow came up. Sometimes we cried from over brimming gratitude and natural love for one another. Some nights there were over 50 people in our building, most were neighbors, and nearly all were new friends.

Leadership Behavior:

“Experiment, take risks, and learn from the accompanying mistakes.”

One of the boldest moves we made on the second day back was to post signs at the entrance to the valley and at our driveway. “Friends of Peutz Valley. Daily Gathering @ 4:30pm. Information Sharing, Food, Toilets.” Rita, like any rational person, was nervous about advertising our home to a ton of unpredictable strangers. I had no idea if the signs would do anything, but without phones, cell phone reception, and being in an isolated rural valley, I wanted the whole world to know we were in there and needed help. We got a few weird folks in the weeks that followed, but none that we couldn’t handle. And boy did the help come!

Witness To Pain Without Turning Away

A number of people appeared in our doorway that were really suffering beyond the now familiar shock, grief and disorientation from losing a house, a routine, and a lifetime of possessions.

One fellow, a neighbor in his 30’s that I had never met before, came into the room during a relatively quiet moment on one of the early the days. “My wife is dead,” he said “and I’m not sure what to do.” My goodness, what do you say to that? After learning more about who he was, where he had lived, and the circumstances of his wife’s death, we did our best to console him. He was managing but clearly in a daze. We could only make sure that he had a place to go, and some friends that he could connect with for the short term, and that he had connected with Red Cross and other relief agencies.

A terrible feeling of impotence washed over me in that meeting. I felt such longing to make it all better for him, but I knew that his path of healing would likely take years. We later discovered that his wife had not left the valley with other neighbors in the hour before the fire arrived. Her keys were found in front of her truck and the family dog was found after the fire, wounded but alive. Our best guess is that the fire had gone past her house without setting it ablaze, and after that she must have thought she would be safe and stayed. Her remains were found in what was the area of her

bedroom. The assumption is that she went to bed, and then the house went up around her as she slept.

Another case, one with a somewhat better outcome, involves an earth-moving contractor we had hired the previous spring. His property is in an area called Wildcat Canyon a dozen or more miles away from our valley. He appeared at our door about four days after the fire with one of the most amazing stories I had ever heard.

At four o'clock in the morning, he woke up to discover the fire had come to the top of the canyon above his property. In the time it took him to get shoes and pants on, the fire had come to his doorstep. He ran to get away from the house leaving behind everything. This included his dump truck, tools, and backhoe. After vaulting two high fences, he arrived at his neighbor's house, a policewoman with a very young daughter. He banged on the door yelling to get her up. The sleepy woman quickly realizing the trouble grabbed her daughter, and a litter of puppies, and all jumped into her car. They raced down the road toward the opening of the canyon. Flaming trees hit the car, damaging but not stopping it. They made it to the bottom of the canyon to be received by the police who were stationed below the fire. Over a dozen people were not so lucky as our friend and his neighbor, and lost their lives in Wildcat Canyon.

What truly astounded me about our friend upon his arrival to our place was his gratitude and resourcefulness. After telling us about how he lost everything and nearly lost his life just a few days earlier, he said, "I understand you have some equipment here that I can operate. Would you like me to run it for you to clean up your property?"

How do you respond to an offer like that for assistance from someone who has lost everything? Well, obviously not *everything*. In fact, it's safe to say that our friend didn't lose those most important qualities: honor, dignity, resourcefulness, and an attitude of service.

A third vignette, which jumps us ahead by four weeks, highlights one of the most resilient human spirits I have had the honor to meet. This fellow lives on a steep hillside where he has made a wonderful house site with a spectacular view. He is also a contractor with heavy equipment. He was a recent cancer survivor and still struggled with side effects and numerous health problems. His marriage was troubled, and in the week before the fire he and his wife separated. During the fire his mobile home was destroyed. Immediately upon returning to his neighborhood, he began supporting his neighbors to clear the rubble from their house sites with his equipment. This work continued for weeks after the fire. His insurance company had paid for him to buy and refurnish a replacement mobile home.

Four weeks after the fire, on Thanksgiving, he was just about ready to leave the motel and move back home with all new possessions tidily set up in a brand new mobile home.

On Thanksgiving Day, the same whaling Santa Ana winds blew all the ash and dust from the fire back into the air giving the place that same eerie sepia haze. It also blew the new trailer clean off its mounts, off the pad, and rolled it down the mountainside into a tangled pile. When we saw this fellow at our place he looked like Job and was feeling the weight of the tests to his spirit. These experiences challenged his will to live.

In his case, Rita and I could only hold this very tough man's weary hand and tell him what we knew to be true, that people in his neighborhood love him very much and that they need him. We also told him that we would always be available to him if that darkness of spirit should descend over him again. We did our best to completely open our hearts to him so that in that moment he would receive as much courage as we could give him to help shoulder the yolk of living through the next day and the day after.

In the months that have passed since then, this fellow has done wonderfully inspired earthwork for his neighbors. He has also had to endure two major surgeries related to the cancer treatments. He continues to be the purest example of true grit I have ever met. And, of course, he has another new mobile home (with extra wind tie-downs).

Within a week of posting our signs on Alpine Boulevard we had daily deliveries of food arriving. Some came from our own catering orders of roast chicken and salads. Some came from vanloads of church teen club members with 50 soggy but very edible pizzas. Eventually meals started coming from the Red Cross.

Materials and supplies started showing up too. Folks from as far away as Imperial Valley started arriving with the family truck and horse trailer full of everything from clothes to baby formula, gloves to chain saw lube. Within a day, the crisis shifted from getting a full belly and a bed, to "What are we going to do with all this stuff?" It was a crisis of abundance and organization. I ordered a 20' x 40' tent to be set up outside our building so we could get things out of our now overrun meeting room.

The most amazing things arrived. Two monstrous trucks driven by sinewy Marine Corp soldiers appeared one day. The first truck towed a generator/light-tower and the second a water tank. We had them set up the light station right in the middle of our property and told them we wanted it to run every night for as long they would let us keep it. We wanted to light up that very dark valley so that everyone would know with complete certainty that we were there and open for business.

Seeing that stadium light flooding our blacked out valley felt like a defiant shout to the fire and ash that we had not been beaten. Day or night, we were going to be loud, proud, and walking forward. The young marines came for more than a month, each night to turn it on and each morning to turn it off. They were so proud to provide their equipment to help us, and did so with a "Yes, sir, what ever you need

Leadership Behavior:
"Get real. Feel, Deal, and Heal."

These experiences are so intense that they strip away any pretense or façade one may put forth. If the fire burned away the covering on things, these experiences burned away the veneer on our egos. Someone who had endured the ravages of war, or crime, may say "Of course, what did you think would happen?" For me, these people, with their tragedy, their honor, and their tenacity, commanded me to step forward, to do my part. Their heroism compelled me to call forth the hero in me as best I could. I was humbled by their pain and awed by their spirits.

For leaders in this kind of situation, as Rita would say "Get real, feel, deal and heal." There is no room for ego or fantasy here – you gotta get real! There is no room for denial and paralysis here – you gotta feel it and deal with it. There is no room for wallowing in pain because there is work to be done so that you and others can move on – you gotta heal." You can't be a powerful leader without these behaviors.

sir" attitude. At some point we discovered that all that equipment and all those young men and women had seen war in the middle east only months before. We were so grateful that they survived their terrible tasks to help us with our relatively easy ones.

Calling Upon Spirit & Offering a Vision

In the first month after the fire, our nightly community meetings ranged in attendance from 25 to 50 people. In the first two weeks everyone showed up covered in ash and grime. Everything was covered in soot, and if you were sifting through your rubble, all the worse. As the weeks passed, faces, hands, and clothes got progressively brighter.

In the period from Halloween through Thanksgiving, the themes of our community meetings were: Who's here? What's needed? Who's going to make that happen? And, where are we going to find materials to get it done? How are we going to clean up this mess? How are we going to survive this financially? These were the practical matters of sifting, assessing, and triage to help us climb back up the hierarchy of needs.

There was an emotional and spiritual hierarchy we were ascending at the same time. In the early meetings, everyone appeared so devastated and shocked that offering short prayers to open meetings seemed to be the most useful thing to do. Though not a religious person, I could feel that the grief, shock and fear we were all navigating made me feel small, helpless, and sad. I took the chance that others felt the same way, and called upon a great spirit to help us.

At the outset of many meetings, I did my best to guide the assembled community to set aside their burdens. I spoke about seeing those that had been taken by the fire in a bright and loving place. I called upon the Great Spirit that brings comfort, strength, and clarity to carry us forward swiftly and powerfully. We had lost a neighbor to the fire, and everyone had lost something dear, some much more than others. The awesomeness of the devastation itself invoked a power much greater than any of us. I was determined that we would call up that power by whatever name, find that power in ourselves, and set out to put things right again.

It occurred to me during that first month that if we didn't learn from this experience, or worse, if we let it be repeated, we would be dishonoring those who had died in this disaster. If we didn't learn from all the life, wealth, and precious belongings that were consumed in that fire that would be real negligence – a shameful waste.

I began to say that there are the two goals we owe it to those that were taken by the fire to accomplish: **Goal #1 - We will speak of this in two years as the best thing that ever happened in our valley; and Goal #2 - No one gets left behind as we rebuild, everyone comes along.**

We were all trying to make sense out of the fire. Why was my placed burned and yours spared? What's the meaning behind all this destruction? I decided for myself that it represented an investment we had collectively made. We had invested all that wealth in learning about how to create a community that was safe and loving,

beautiful and sustainable. I won't settle for the fire being a senseless waste. I was, and still am, very clear that I will not let that investment go up in smoke without getting a return on it.

Further, I said many times that we owed it to ourselves to make sure that we didn't simply rebuild what was there before, but to build something truly great and beautiful, better than ever. After all, that began on the first day after the fire. The relationships that were sprouting, and getting nurtured in our community meetings, and being acted out in acts of communal solidarity all over the valley, were far better than had existed in the valley before the fire. There was an element of "real-ness" that made a family out of what had been a lot of maybe-wave-when-I-drive-by neighbors.

From the triage list making sprung self-organized teams with missions to hook up generators, restore well operations, set up camp trailers, and so on. These groups, without hierarchy, simply gathered, sorted out tasks, and got the job done together.

Participation driven by fear or vision?

We knew that, for most of our neighbors, once the immediate shock of the fire had passed and a path toward recovery and rebuilding had emerged, their focus would shift from communal recovery work to individual recovery work. With the exception of a two-month fearful focus on flood and mudslide risk, attention shifted as predicted. When attendance at community meetings began to fall off, we could tell the shift was happening. Fear and uncertainty were dropping to levels that all of us could manage in the relative privacy of our homes, camp trailers, and borrowed or rented quarters.

This shift in attention signaled good news in the respect that our neighbors felt they could manage this phase of recovery on their own. On the other hand it meant that people would make themselves less available to receive and give support to one another. Clearly this is a balancing act – an extreme in either direction is unhealthy.

During the months after the fire the pendulum swung from nearly no attendance at meetings to full-house events. When frightening issues arose like flood, mud, poor insurance company performance, changing or unclear rules in County or Fire Department requirements for rebuilding, the group would gather to try to make sense of it and share intelligence. Those that had done some research, or had some experience, would pass ideas and knowledge on to others and help shed light on the best course of action.

Among a few people I began talking about a vision of a future that used the fire event as a springboard. I thought this was delicate business. For some who had lost their house and possessions to speak of a bright and distant positive future would have been very insensitive and simply impractical. For others who could see the opportunity in the destruction, a vision of the possibilities was just the ticket to help them keep moving.

In our neighborhood, there is significant diversity of values and lifestyles. Having

said that, all of us could relate to how beautiful our valley was before the fire and how important the creek and forest were to our sense of rural life. We all know how important water is to us, both as life giving irrigator and potential danger in flash floods. One of the vision elements I began to talk about involved our stewardship of the forest and watershed.

We have a 3-mile long, 300-foot wide forest that traverses dozens of parcels and is home to all kinds of plant and animal life. The sycamore, oak, willow, and other trees provide a canopy over the road that, in the fall or spring, rivals any New England country road.

I began to talk about what could happen if we took an organized approach to care for these amazing natural renewable resources. What if we constructed well-designed swales and water catch basins to slow topsoil erosion and give our limited rainfall a chance to percolate into the soil and thereby replenish our aquifers? What would happen if we planted trees to replace those that had burned or died from disease? What would it be like if we cleared debris from the creek bed and helped keep it pristine and free of trash and old car parts? How much useful wood and plant matter could be culled from the forest annually in the process of removing the dead and diseased trees? What if we diminished the fire risk by clearing brush along the road and sowed wild flower seeds in its place? What would happen if we formed a group of trained people who could lead the care and feeding of our forest – “Forest Stewards”?

These questions were intriguing to various people in the valley. They began to hold conversations and sought out expertise on fire response, local fire suppression equipment, and fuel management practices. A truck was donated by a local business that we could use to support a budding Forest & Watershed Club. Momentum began to build, not in the spirit of recovering from something terrible, but in the spirit of

Leadership Behavior:

“Envision an uplifting and ennobling future.”

The fastest way to get out of the pit of sorrow is to get working with friends on someone else’s problems, and do so in the spirit of lifting everyone up toward a brighter future. It felt so good to start thinking, talking, organizing, and acting toward a positive idea of two years hence, that a huge amount of energy got released.

Being on the well rebuild group, or the power hook-up group, or the logging group, or the flood response group became a badge of honor. Folks who worked on these “teams” would proudly acknowledge each other in community meetings. Broad smiles and embraces, the kind you’d expect to see on a mountain climbing expedition that achieved a summit, were not uncommon and especially when tough hook-ups or clean-ups were completed. This pride was doubled when the work was done for someone everyone knew wasn’t able or couldn’t afford to get it done on his or her own. Those acts made us all bigger people, bigger than the fire, bigger than old animosities between neighbors, bigger than we thought we could be. We became proud of our valley in a whole new way and could see beyond the ash and black sticks to a time that would be green, clean, and full of smiles again.

After I experienced these things, I began to visualize how the fire had released massive amounts of energy as it burned through the valley’s trees, homes, and all those precious belongings. I’ve been told that when 40 acres of houses, brush and woodlands burns it releases the same amount of energy as a WWII era atomic bomb. I thought, **“I want every bit of that energy back in the valley. Not in the same way as before, but in better more beautiful and useful forms. I want every single calorie back, every single one!”** Though somewhat esoteric, this sentiment along with our two goals has galvanized people in the valley. We knew we could do it. We are doing it. And many already say that the fire was the best thing that ever happened to them. There is a long way to go for many people, and we’re still working it.

building something beautiful and that could last for generations to come. Participants in the Fire & Watershed Club have come from all over the valley. Keeping momentum going is so difficult, but consistent symbolic small efforts do add up.

At nearly the same time conversations were germinating among a few neighbors about recovering our gardens and landscaping. Not long after, a Garden Club emerged chartered by about six families. Gardening by definition is a vision-based activity in that the gardener has an idea of what they would like to see, smell, feel, and eat in the near future. Since so much of the landscaping of the valley was reduced to ashes, a perfect opportunity to plan, build and start cultivating gardens opened up. Beyond that, the opportunity for those with homes to help those without to bring beauty and life to their properties in simple but tangible ways couldn't be beat.

The group has adopted a book called Gaia's Garden by Toby Hemingway to provide a focal point to their approach. This is very consistent with the Fire & Watershed Club's focus in that Hemingway's book describes an approach to organic sustainable gardening and landscaping called Permaculture (word coined by naturalist and designer Bill Mollison from Australia). The general tenants of Permaculture include working with nature rather than against it, and applying design principles to the arrangement of home, garden, and buildings so that the most yield possible is generated from the synergies between the parts. The ultimate goal is that the gardener grows an edible and self-sustaining ecosystem.

The vision of Permaculture has both short and long-term aspects. In the short run there are plenty of things to do that conserve water, electricity, and other resources. There are earth shaping projects to capture and direct rainwater.

Leadership Behavior:

"Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes, and dreams."

Among corporate and government leaders is a lot of conversation about what "vision" you have for this or that. All too often in these circles the assumption is that a leader must have clearly in mind a well-formed and articulate message. Further, he or she is expected to deliver that vision to the hungry masses as if they were delivering a finely honed epic poem or a sonnet. In my experience this is extremely rare, and many leaders I encounter don't know where to start.

I say begin with an interesting question about the future you'd like to see. Ask a lot of "What if...?" questions. Ask about how good it could get. Ask about what success would look like assuming that you had it. The assumption of success is one of the most powerful things you can do for yourself and others in the exploration for vision. Give yourself permission to set aside the limitations and considerations of the present reality for the purposes of generating vision. Vision by definition is not about the present reality. There will be plenty of time for injecting increasing doses of reality as the path toward realizing the vision is sorted out.

Many leaders I work with say, "I can't get my people to adopt the vision I am putting forward." I ask them who was involved in crafting the vision and nearly all will say that only a small number of people were included in the dialogue about the future. People don't resist change, people resist coercion. If the dialogue about the future is widespread, engagement in a vision is built in.

In our valley the vision of the future is being crafted in each meeting of the Garden Club and the Forest & Watershed Club. It is born of the values, interests, hopes, dreams, and fears of those who participate. The dialogue about possible futures and explorations of "What if?" not only focuses those who participate toward a positive future, but it helps them heal the trauma of the recent past.

The goal is to gain the most utility from every drop. In the long haul there are forestry, wetlands, ground cover, and building projects to create truly self-sustaining systems that grow more and more rich and healthy from decade to decade. These include the human social and commercial systems as well, but in a life giving way, not the ever more consuming environmentally destructive way so prevalent all around us.

This group has been meeting monthly and is still picking up members. It is predominantly the ladies of the valley who gather, honorary male members are allowed. Needless to say, a great deal of valley social fabric gets woven, stitched, and patched at each meeting. Gardening always comes up in the conversation somewhere. We know this because gardens all over the valley are pumping out produce and there are conversations of farm stands, produce exchanges, and other wonderful life-giving activities. The squash, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, eggplant, and eggs, eggs, eggs, are evidence of nature's resilience and our ability to refocus toward health and a vision of a positive future.

Celebrating Progress

We chose to celebrate our survival, solidarity, and progress in ways that coincided with other annual celebrations. The fire happened roughly at Halloween (some trick or treat!), so November, the first month after the fire, was all about the experience of the emergency. We made such wonderful progress in that first month. Thanksgiving, therefore, was the perfect time to celebrate our successes and gratitude for simply surviving, and all the help we had received from the outside and from one another. It was a wonderful time to take a breath, pause, reflect on everyone's good work, and party together.

To drive home the reality that we had forged a family among our neighbors, and with our volunteer helpers, we set up a single 50-foot long table at which the community, about 65 people, sat for Thanksgiving dinner. It was a spectacular feast prepared by one of the local churches with all the trimmings. The feelings of gratitude and pride in our progress were coming through loud and clear. It was at this event that we celebrated the end of the "emergency phase" for our valley, and the beginning of the "clean-up phase".

As I recall, after this dinner Rita and I checked our selves into a hotel on the coast.

Leadership Behavior:

**"Know when to hold 'em.
Know when to fold 'em.
And, know when to walk
away."**

One of the many traps of leadership is confusing the act of leading, with your identity as a leader. I find that the minute I start thinking that the people I am working with cannot succeed without me, there is trouble ahead. From that point on my behavior and language will invite their dependency. I will not call forth the lion in each person, but rather the lamb.

Leaders who fall into this trap will expect people to be ineffective without their direction and energy. This trap is especially easy to fall into if the people around the leader aren't taking responsibility for their lives, actions and results. They will give their personal power away to the leader, a move that invariably leads to disappointment and disillusionment when they discover the faults and frailties of the leader.

For Rita and I to take a few days away from the valley and all it's needs was very important for us, and, I believe, for our neighbors too. Knowing when to walk away, even for a short time, is so important.

After four straight weeks of 16-hour days, our neighbors told us we both had the “100-yard stare”, and needed to get away. It takes a tremendous self-awareness and clarity to stay detached from such drama. It is, therefore, very hard to know when one has gone past one’s limits of endurance for stress, work, and emotional output. I am still working on that skill. After the fire I arrogantly had gotten lost in the illusion that the valley would come to a standstill if I weren’t there. Getting away was very helpful for both of us, and helped our neighbors run with the ball in our absence.

After another month, around Christmas, we hosted another celebration, this time to mark the end of the bulk of the clean-up work. During November and December, literally mountains of rubble had been scooped up, put into dumpsters and hauled away. Following the rubble clean up came the demolition and disposal of concrete foundations. These two steps were largely completed by the end of December, with some properties taking months longer due to insurance problems and other issues.

For the Christmas celebration, we did something really spectacular. We brought in a five-piece blues band to help us feel really good about feeling really bad. Once again our church friends catered a wonderful meal. As an amazing demonstration of caring, the church also assembled gift buckets for every household in the valley. These included gift certificates, tools, homemade coffee cake, and some fresh fruit. To see fifty-plus of these buckets all lined up for folks to grab was truly amazing. On top of that, a gift had been arranged for every child in the valley and for the neighboring community of Dunbar Lane. For children who had lost everything, and for their parents who couldn’t provide a normal family holiday, this was very special.

It’s hard to express the power of these moments when one community embraces and celebrates another community. Everyone is lifted. The delight in the eyes of the volunteers was equaled in beauty by the delight in the eyes of the children who, although clearly out of their element, knew they were being loved and cared for by complete strangers.

To top off our holiday experience, blessings, gifts, and donations of cash streamed in from all over the United States. It was pretty overwhelming. And the blues band, that donated their time, rocked the house!

Leadership Behavior:
“Celebrate team accomplishments regularly.”

These celebration waypoints in the flow of our recovery process gave us closure to chapters in the forced march from emergency to clean up and onward toward rebuilding. They gave us an opportunity to put painful things behind us, take a breath and set down our burdens, and feel the joy of being with friends in the process of doing something greater than any of us had ever imaged we would be doing. These moments recharge the heart, give punctuation to the story of life, and open the door for new beginnings.

Acknowledging Senseless Acts of Kindness

During these celebrations we would take a moment to just talk about the “senseless acts of kindness” that we had witnessed, participated in, or received. It was during these conversations with the community that we made the opportunity to acknowledge, thank, and honor the many people who had touched our lives in some positive way. People we talked about included volunteers, federal, state and county

workers, church leaders and volunteers, social services and non-profit personnel, and trades-people of all kinds. In one way or another they all made a difference.

Sometimes the difference that made the difference was not the ostensible reason the contributor was there with you. Sometimes it was something small and special in that moment, just between you and them that was the real contribution.

On an afternoon about one week after the fire, a group of men came into our meeting room. There must have been about ten, most in blue shirts and one who was clearly their point person. I came to find out that he was the head pastor of a large church in a neighboring community, and had come to get answers to the two ubiquitous questions: "What do you need?" and "How can I help?" He had brought with him Ray Junta, a Chaplain who had served at Ground Zero in Manhattan after 9/11 and who, in turn, had brought his team from Maryland to support recovery efforts in our area. After we talked for some time about all the needs, drama and activity that I was trying to coordinate and we had concluded our discussion, a very powerful thing happened.

The pastor asked if they could pray for me. The ten men gathered around me and all put a hand on one of my shoulders. First, I felt the weight of their hands, then the weight of their love and compassion for me, a tired and clearly overwhelmed person doing the best he could with what he had at hand and in his head. Then I listened to them ask Spirit to bring Rita and I all the protection, strength, clarity, and resources that we would need to take care of our selves and to help our community.

Whatever shred of composure I had at the moment was overtaken by the kindness of this simple act. As I cried, they hugged me and reminded me that everything would work out, and that they would be back with reinforcements.

During the fire recovery time, that was one of many experiences I had of men being spectacularly loving and kind. They were demonstrating for me the form of masculinity that nurtures those in need. It's not unlike the way a father attends to a newborn son or daughter. They also demonstrated so beautifully the kind of leadership that calls upon the power of Spirit to solve the seemingly unsolvable in a way that helps a person connect with their sense of infinite resources.

Leadership Behavior:
"Encourage the heart by recognizing individual contributions to every project."

For a person to hear that they made a real and important contribution to aid someone, relieve pain or assist in the achievement of some goal is one of life's most satisfying experiences. Some people go their whole life not knowing whether their existence mattered. For the folks that contributed to our valley, we want them to know that their contribution made all the difference. We did our best to express our gratitude along the way to as many people as we could.

Beside the group acknowledgements, there have been all kinds of special recognition arriving for those in our valley who consistently showed up, helped, or somehow brought resources to bear on the situation. Sometimes it is a warm familial nod, a bit of gratis yard work, a fruit basket on the doorstep, or some other thoughtful gesture. These kinds of exchanges have brought even the most committed loners and introverts out into the community as they both receive and give these kinds of individual recognition. If only global warming had as beneficial an effect as the warming among our neighbors from these kinds of acknowledgements of good ol' fashioned kindness.

That church did a wonderful job of bringing hundreds of volunteers and resources to our valley. Chaplain Ray and his team came on several occasions and did amazing job coordinating all manner of tools and supplies, sending work parties to clear properties, getting materials on and off of the property, and so on. It was an honor to work with all of them.

Becoming Strong Again

At the start of each new year, I do my best to set time aside to revisit my long term goals, take stock of progress, synthesize some lessons for improvement, and envision another two or three years forward. In December after the fire, it took some significant effort to simply find my journal to see about what had happened during 2003. Surely there were other events beside the fire! Realizing how much challenge I was facing, aided by still having a house and belongings, it occurred to me that those who had lost so much must be really in a state. Further more, in the aftermath of the fire and all its tasks, who could stop long enough to "take control" of their life again? How on earth could we imagine a normal life?

To provide a way to slow down, look around, and recalibrate goals, Rita conducted a Personal Goal Setting workshop for interested neighbors in January. Several families attended and spent the day going through the workshop that so many of Rita's colleagues had experienced. Examining goals, values, progress, making collages of the future, and related activities helped bring participants into the present. They got a chance to reconnect to their core, independent of the drama that surrounded us.

Another example of taking back control of our lives is the development of a Peutz Valley Disaster Preparedness document. The first edition focuses on emergency procedures for flooding and landslides. This was assembled by a couple valley residents and includes: communication plans for phone and wireless by dividing the valley into house clusters; and a mix of county, state, and federal flood preparedness checklists and information pages. This document was published, bound, and distributed to valley residents along with a presentation by the editors. Along with the booklet, a number of valley residents who own earth moving equipment communicated with each other about where their machines are staged in case of flood, who to contact up stream or down stream from a problem and other procedural details.

All the folks who have taken part in this facet of disaster preparedness have great pride in what they have done together. Talking about it while times are good keeps the notion of collaboration at the fore when things are bad.

We were tested in a minor way last spring when the valley's creek rose over eight feet in less than an hour. It washed over the bridge upstream from our property and then over our bridge. Within minutes neighbors were on our land, though we were gone, to take care of the two horses corralled in the path of the overflow, and ensured that everything was AOK. Nearly as fast as it came up, it went back down. Though our bridge suffered minor erosion around the edges, and the horses were rattled (you would be too if you were up to your knees in rushing muddy water) there was no serious damage. The community response was very impressive and just what you would hope to see happen.

Our valley phone directory is another example of people taking the ball and running with it. We put the first edition together in the summer of 2003 so that we could organize in response to fears of rapid development in the valley. The directory, by the way, was one of the most useful recovery tools after the fire. For the highway patrol officer who guarded the entrance to the valley while it was still burning, it kept out looters and sightseers. If you weren't in the directory, you didn't get to go in there! It was our first tool for finding each other after the phone lines burned down by way of cell phone numbers. It also became our initial checklist for damage assessments, needs, and so on.

Since the fire the directory has been updated two or three times to account for new folks we've met at community meetings and changes while people are rebuilding. Two valley ladies now make the directory updates. They track people down periodically to gain updates for their contact information.

These kinds of efforts, be they directory, goal setting, disaster preparedness, garden club, or fire/watershed club are such powerful tools for community building and each offers a unique way to participate and practice leadership. If any individual had attempted to hold onto or control these efforts they would not have worked nor been something that the participants could take pride in cultivating. Given that these are just months old, it will be fascinating to see how each initiative matures over time.

The last example I'll mention of getting strong is making use of the architecture of community that was present in the valley. The barn that Rita and I fixed up, though old, crumbling and thoroughly funky, served as a marvelous tool for community behaviors to emerge. The ground floor is outfitted with a wood stove, chairs for 35, tables, marker boards, library of resource materials, music, internet stations, and a place for caterers to set out delivered meals. These are the tools of our trade as strategic planning consultants. They made it possible for people to gather in a warm and casual (or should I say causal) setting. That architecture alone, irrespective of our facilitation, is enough to make 90% of what needed to be done after the fire possible. This poses a powerful question for town planners: Are we designing and building for community relationships to spontaneously happen or are we building for isolation. I think the latter is the trend we're suffering under environmentally, socially, and economically.

At any rate, the big-blue-barn created a strong focal point for the community and the surrounding grounds provided ample staging space and parking for the flow of people, goods, and equipment.

As of this writing we are staging concrete pipe sections that were donated for improving valley drainage in anticipation of this year's rainy season. Now the first heavy rains of the season have begun we're all wishing we had already gotten that pipe in the ground.

If there is a leadership element to this aspect of the story it is that the choice to build architecture that promotes good community behavior to naturally emerge is critical.

Leadership Behavior:

“Strengthen people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support.”

The stories elsewhere in this segment highlight how self-organizing small groups, with or without validation and encouragement from leaders, can get amazing things done. Many of the stories highlight shared power and working together to increase our competence at life after fire. To highlight visible support let me tell you about two of the many organizations that helped us after the fire. There were so many, and we are deeply grateful to them all. The style and spirit of these two very different groups is truly inspirational. Though both are “faith based” groups, they are modeling leadership behaviors that any organization would envy.

First, let me offer our experience of the Taiwan Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation. This organization is one of the two large Buddhist organizations in Taiwan. It was started in 1966 as a group of thirty housewives who saved a small amount of money each day and now distributes millions of dollars in their disaster response efforts. Tzu Chi focuses on community service and outreach (especially medical, educational, and disaster relief). They conduct their mission via an international network of volunteers and a small number of monks and nuns.

Shortly after the fire I was approached by a representative from Tzu Chi asking if they could come to Peutz Valley to provide a gift of \$500 to each family that was burned out. Once they arrived, we toured them through the area to confirm which homes were destroyed. From that data, they simply wrote checks on the spot to provide monetary support to those who needed it most. Their contribution was very simple, direct and effective. The recipients were contributed to with dignity, care and without the additional trauma of mind numbing caseworker interviews, paperwork, and multiple visits.

The really uncommon thing about their visit (as if anything about it was common) was that the degree of compassion and sensitivity that each of the uniformed Tzu Chi volunteers showed to our neighbors. The love was palpable. My sister who came down from Eugene, OR for two weeks to help us, as well as my wife Rita, were completely undone by the kindness these people exuded (not unlike my experience with the 9/11 chaplain and his team).

The second shining example of visible support came from Faith Chapel, a church in Spring Valley, CA (not too far from Alpine).

The leaders of this church made a commitment to send volunteers and support to our neighborhood, in coordination with the other community service and faith groups working other damaged neighborhoods. Many groups came and went, but this outfit really adopted us. We get monthly calls from them even now to find out how we’re doing in our recovery. Every time it rains they call to find out if we need people to fill sand bags or whatever else may be required in times of mud and flood.

Some of the visible support that we received from Faith Chapel includes (and this is a shockingly incomplete list): hot meals for 50-75 on multiple occasions including full-on Thanksgiving and Christmas events; volunteers that kept coming over and over; a volunteer site coordinator who served at our place full-time everyday for a month to direct volunteers, run supplies, make material/labor deals, and track various projects; and it goes on and on. They went so far as to prepare for sleeping arrangements for any of our neighbors who might get displaced if there is a flood or mudslide in the winter months after the fire. They called today as our creek is rising and neighbors are finding out just how much mud will move in the first major rains of the year.

It’s a humbling and awe inspiring experience to receive help from organizations like the two mentioned here. In those dark days, the contribution that those institutions made is only out shone by the light that their volunteers brought to our valley.

Concluding, for now...

It is my sincere hope that these stories have touched something in you. I hope that they remind you to acknowledge your own leadership qualities, and to bring them forward in service to your community. Words are not enough to thank the volunteers and others who did just that in service to our community.

The following are a few of the organizations that contributed to us along the way. We invite you to join us in sending them business and support in gratitude for their kindness.

Rocket Realty	Alpine, CA
Audio Associates	La Mesa, CA
Viejas Casino	Alpine, CA
Faith Chapel	Spring Valley, CA
US Marine Corps	Camp Pendleton, CA
Service Team of Professionals	El Cajon, CA
Tom C. Dyke Drilling & Blasting	Alpine, Ca
Southwest Mobile Storage	Lakeside, CA
San Diego Foundation	San Diego, CA
Rescued Animals	El Cajon, CA
Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation	San Diego, CA
Menonite Christian Disaster Relief	Yuma, AZ
Online Bookkeeping & Tax Service	Alpine, CA
Policyholders Adjusting Service	San Diego, CA
Julia Griess, Century 21	Encinitas, CA
Koch-Armstrong General Engineering	Lakeside, CA
Wardell Builders Inc.	Solana Beach, CA
East County Pump Service	Alpine, CA
Oscars Tires & Wheels Unlimited	El Cajon, CA
All Aspect Well & Pump Systems Inc.	Descanso, CA
CEM Electric	Lakeside, CA
Skyline Church	La Mesa, CA
Lutheran Disaster Response of Southern	California
Lakeside Fire Department	Lakeside, CA
Pat & Oscars	El Cajon
We Care Ministries	Maryland
Alpine Kiwanis Club	Alpine, CA
Hallmark Communities	San Diego, CA
CEM Electric	Lakeside, CA
Ennis Inc., Materials Division	Lakeside, CA
Prof. Assoc. of Specialty Contractors	San Diego, CA
T.C. Construction	Encinitas, CA
Lutheran Social Services of So. California	
Red Cross of San Diego	San Diego
San Diego Gas & Electric and SBC California and their crews from across the western states	

At one point or another we interacted with nearly every government agency you can think of, and though to many to mention, we're glad they were there too! Theirs is often the most unappreciated job of all. So, thanks from us to all of you.