



Erica Smigielski
Founder & Principal
P. 415 842 7383
M. 415 298 4341
www.sparkpathconsulting.com

What the Northern California Fires Have Taught Me

There's no doubt that the impact of the current fires in Northern California are horrific, devastating and downright terrifying for the families being displaced. However, this darkness brings magnificent light from the heroic efforts by fire fighters, first responders, law enforcement and healthcare professionals. It's simply humbling on so many levels that - without words - we feel this light within us when things appear dark and bleak in our world.

As the fires grew stronger, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) took precautionary action to shut down power for nearly 1 million users in my county in an effort to avoid the potential of starting / spreading fires due to wind damage to exposed wires. This left me in the dark (literally and figuratively) with mixed emotions. How could an action taken with positive intent result in such darkness?

Then, as hours turned into days without power and spotty cell phone coverage (if any at all), I began to see how these fires and power outages have brought light into so many areas of my life. Here are 6 things that have shined bright during this period of darkness...

My work suddenly became the priority it needs to be -- 2nd to my family

As an independent consultant often working remotely, it can be hard to draw the line between work and personal life, especially when they both take place at home. So, as we lost power, it was with a bit of irony I found refuge for my family in a co-working space that quickly enabled us to get into a room with access to power and Wi-Fi.

Having somewhere functional to figure out logistics and plan for what was ahead was a huge sigh of relief. The co-working space even ordered pizza for the entire office, including my family. The level of kindness and consideration shown was much needed and tremendously appreciated.

Eliminating technology slows my roll and allows space for beautiful, meaningful things

We live in such a fast-paced world dictated by what's "next". We're constantly connected, never more than an arm's-length away from a screen. Don't get me wrong - technology is an incredibly useful tool that has become so deeply integrated with what it means to be a modern human. But it also distracts and encourages us to detach or escape from situations that otherwise might lend themselves to something real and authentic.

So, being without electricity, I've been able to more fully explore and reconnect with what it means to be human on a deeper level. I've had rich and meaningful conversations with my daughters as we lay in bed with flashlights. Having time to sit down and think, I finally wrote out some long overdue thank you notes. As a family, we played board games, carved pumpkins, and made Halloween costumes, all without rushing to the next "important" task.

Self-care becomes a normality and not a luxury

It's easy to get so lost in the worries of work, school, and life in general that you feel overwhelmed, stressed out,

grumpy, or otherwise not yourself – often without even realizing it. This can lead to turning down invitations or avoiding opportunities/activities on the basis that you're too tired, too busy, or just plain fed-up with the world as a whole.

But these last few days have allowed me the time for things I wouldn't have in "normal" life. Things like taking an impromptu dog walk with a dear friend, getting to bed each night by 9pm allowing me a full night's rest, and catching up reading magazines and books.

Living life in harmony with Mother Earth is naturally magical

When the sun starts to rise, we slowly begin our day. We boil water to make French press coffee using camping supplies, thoughtfully make breakfast to use what might spoil first, and interact with each other without a phone or laptop between us. There's no instant satisfaction with a Kuerig cup of coffee and no quick breakfast to race out the door to our next commitment.

As the afternoon fades into dusk, my family and I begin to think about dinner prep before it's dark and becomes more of a chore. No quick thing to throw in the microwave or warm up in the oven. Just a good ol' fashioned home-cooked meal.

As dusk settles in and the sun begins to set, we enjoy a candle-lit dinner as a family. Although eating dinner as a family is not unusual in our home, these meals were extra special as we reflected upon how grateful we were for what we **did** have.

When the sun is well-set and the darkness is thick, my body wants to rest and settle into bed. I don't remember the last time I went to bed consecutively before 9:30pm. Bliss!

And then... we repeat.

Watching how the community comes together in unexpected and peaceful ways

Oftentimes our sense of local community is blurred due to all the virtual communities most of us readily and regularly take part in. So, it might not be until a tragedy strikes that the benefits of a strong community really become apparent.

I've witnessed simple acts of kindness such as offering a warm cup of coffee to a neighbor as well as larger acts of generosity like a hotel bending their rules to accommodate evacuees and their pets. Or three stores in our city operating from backup generators allowing some frantic shoppers to purchase necessary supplies like flashlights. Even employees at stores in neighboring cities unaffected by power outages offering to help set up campers or otherwise simply showing compassion in the face of distress.

Lastly, I think about regrowth and reawakening

Seeing the scorched surfaces of Mother Earth and the heaviness of the aftermath left behind by these fires, it's hard to not feel empty and hollow. Yet, I know that from this fire and ash comes new growth, new trees, and new life.

“Bad” situations don’t always lead to “bad” outcomes. I hear over and over how this jarring experience has caused friends to live in the moment, experience gratitude (I mean **really** experience) and have a reawakening of where priorities lie. So, whether it's something as tangible as a fire ripping through your city or a tough situation at work, try to look for the light in the darkness – I guarantee there's always something to learn.



A passionate organizer of people and initiatives, Erica Smigielski brings over twenty years of experience in project leadership to financial software and SaaS companies who want to launch their next big idea. She leads large-scale, complex projects like product launches and company mergers and acquisitions as well as focused efforts to bring structure and process to fast-track businesses. Erica holds certifications as a Stanford Advanced Project Manager as well as a Certified Group Facilitator, making her a master orchestrator of strategic planning, as well as a skillful communicator who can expertly navigate complex group dynamics.