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This morning, Julio Frenk was formally UCLA's 7th chancellor. Together, you have our future—one that is connective, in

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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

A California wildfire destroyed my home in an instant. It took years for me to recover

By Frances Dinkelspiel

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Gift Article



Houses burn on Rockridge Boulevard in the Oakland hills on Oct. 20, 1991. The Tunnel Fire was a harbinger of disasters in California.
Olga Shalygin/Associated Press 1991



Listen Now: A California wildfire destroyed my home in an instant. It took years for me to rec



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There are few things as shocking as watching your home burn down.

I felt numb after my house, the first I owned, the one in which I hoped to raise my family, was destroyed in the Oct. 20, 1991, fire that swept through the Oakland and Berkeley hills. It was a hot and blustery day, and my husband, his parents and I had blithely gone to San Francisco for brunch at Zuni Cafe. When we looked down Market Street and saw the towering plume of smoke over the East Bay hills, we rushed back. But we were too late. My husband borrowed a bike to try to rescue our cat, but firefighters descending from the burning hills told him to turn around; our street was too hot even for them.

When we were able to return a few days later, I stared at a heap of twisted metal, smoldering wood and piles of ash where my house once stood. Nothing recognizable remained.

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All I had left was a bundle of workout clothes in the trunk of my car.

When the Tunnel Fire, as it came to be known, destroyed 2,900 houses and killed 25 people, I thought it was a one-off event, a rare disaster. I had no clue it was a harbinger of things to come in our hotter, climate-challenged world. In the past 34 years, thousands of destructive wildfires have swept through California. We remember them by their names — Camp, Tubbs and Woolsey — and their death tolls.

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But, honestly, there have been so many that they blend together.

The fires ripping through Los Angeles County are of a magnitude never seen in California. The entire community of Pacific Palisades, home to 23,000 people and dozens of movie stars, is gone. The Eaton Fire has decimated large parts of Altadena, a historic Black community. At least 10,000 structures have burned. Fortunately, the death toll has been low. Officials have discovered 10 bodies, although they warn that the number will grow.

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The sheer number of fires over the decades means there is a pattern to recovery. It will be years before the sections of Los Angeles County that burned will return to a normal state. But they will, and when they do, the communities will be better than ever. Paradise, the Butte County town where 86 people died in the 2017 Camp Fire, was [the fastest-growing city in 2024](#), according to the California Department of Finance. People are returning in droves. Three decades after my neighborhood burned, it is again filled with houses (mostly stucco with metal roofs to make them fire-resistant), green trees and flowering plants. The only signs of the 1991 catastrophe are a few lots with no houses, only foundations.

The time, effort and expense to rebuild is enormous, however. Homeowners' lives will be disrupted for years.

The pattern is akin to [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief](#): denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

When the call comes to evacuate, you can't believe this catastrophe is happening to you. At first, you are grateful that no one in your family has been hurt. Only material things have been lost. You find a new appreciation for life. This fades after time, and people will get angry over all the mistakes made fighting the fires.

Then there are the practical aspects. Where will I live? How will I pay for it? There will be a rush on rentals in Los Angeles, and prices will rise. My husband and I waited a few days to search for a home, and most rentals were taken. We finally found one in North Berkeley with exorbitant rent. Luckily, our insurance company agreed to pay.

Dealing with insurance will be difficult and stressful. This is the anger part, particularly for people whose policies were canceled as insurance companies pulled out of the state.

Rebuilding is the bargaining part. There are many questions and decisions: How to remove debris from your lot, do you leave or rebuild, do you recreate your once-beloved home or construct a more resilient one? The little decisions can make you crazy; there will be hundreds of choices about finishings, lights, appliances and the like. And those questions are for the lucky ones with sufficient insurance. Renters and the underinsured might be couch surfing for years or living in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers.

Of course, many will feel depressed. [Studies](#) show that sadness from losing a home can linger for years.

The end stage is acceptance. But I would argue that the last stage is more positive than the word suggests. Disasters can bring out the best in people. (And some bad behavior, although I prefer not to go there). We've seen it this week in Los Angeles. Residents [knocked on door after door](#), warning people to flee. People [hosed off their neighbor's houses](#). Far-flung fire companies [sent engines and personnel](#) to help battle the blazes. Strangers hugged one another. Money flowed in from around the country, including the federal government, to help restore the area.

What helped me survive the destruction of my home and neighborhood were the good deeds done by others. Stores in Alameda County offered discounts to fire survivors. Professional photographers took pictures to replace photos that were lost. The broader Bay Area offered its condolences in many touching ways.

And it helped that I wasn't the only one who had a house burn down. I didn't have to cope in isolation. Thousands of others had lost their homes, too, and we had one another to turn to.

So, while large swaths of Los Angeles have been destroyed in an unprecedented disaster, a new, stronger community will rise.

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It will take time.

But it will happen.

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Frances Dinkelspiel

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