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Guest Editorial: 06/01/2018

Transforming SDC: Don't tread on us

By Tracy Salcedo

It's the witching hour again. The middle of the night, and the park is on my mind.

The idea that I should follow and record the healing of Sonoma Valley Regional Park germinated in the witching hour back when I was in October's wildfire exile. A number of images haunted my dark skies then, but watching fire march through the oaks and blonde grasses from Lake Suttonfield toward Arnold Drive was paramount. My wakeup calls were vivid and disturbing, but my gut and experience told me the park would recover, and I would too. That was solace.

These days I walk in the park and on the neighboring Sonoma Developmental Center open space and see it's done what we knew it would. Early in spring, standing on the trail, on the dam, on the ridgetops, I looked out over green grass and wildflowers; poppies like a thousand exclamation points, lupines like a thousand ideas, buttercups like beds of sunshine. The Mayacamas were tinged with a downy green frosting under the stubble. These days the grasses grow golden and high, arcing toward summertime. If you hadn't been walking here for months and witnessed the transformation, you might never know the park burned.

So what specter wakes me in the midnight hours now? It's the uncertainty surrounding the future of the SDC and its open spaces, the park around the park.

Technically, I suppose, I should stick to the regional park proper. But these lands are integrated. We humans have dropped lines on paper maps to separate them, but on the ground, crossing the boundary comes as naturally to the walker as to wildfire. In my mind and under my shoes Glen Ellen's big backyard is a single entity sweeping down from the ridgetops of Sonoma Mountain to the valley floor and out to Highway 12, encompassing Jack London State Historic Park, the Old Orchard, the maze of trails and roads around Fern Lake, the regional park, the SDC campus, and the meadow where the Little Farm used to be... and my own little plot on London Ranch Road.

The specter of big changes in my backyard jolts me awake. The SDC closes in December. Another batch of neighbors will be gone, and these ones can't come back. They will be missed, and I wish them well. It's upheaval again, and for those folks, it's upheaval they are completely powerless to control and understand.

But the rest of us, who get to stay here and watch SDC transform, understand upheaval well now. The Nuns Fire dropped change like a bomb. On SDC, change is coming like a tide; we can watch it, predict it. We're clever and we've become adaptive, like the snakes and mountain lions that have found a way to thrive in the char, so we might even be able to channel it. Our roots sink deep into these oak woodlands at the foot of Sonoma Mountain. Bring on the change; we'll roll with it. We love it here; we're here to stay.

Still, I find myself struggling. The veneer of recovery remains a veneer; those of us who walk in the park know where the ash pits are, see the charcoaled branches in the grass. We go about our lives much as the woodlands go about their

seasonal changes-mostly successfully, but every once in a while the raw parts peek through, bitter but true reminders that we are as vulnerable to forces of nature as nature itself.

But I digress. What wakes me in the witching hour are not philosophical ponderings of the meaning of bombshell disaster and adaptation. Instead, it's the practical aspects of the creeping change, and how we lovers of the land can help drive that change, make it less an upheaval and more a subtle turning toward something new and wonderful.

In my midnight hours and in conversation with friends, neighbors, and colleagues, I've cultivated a vision for the future of the SDC and Eldridge that honors its history and preserves the open space and retains everything that makes Eldridge the perfect, calming gateway to my country home; what has been dubbed, accurately if not poetically, the semirural character of Glen Ellen. It's so damn simple. The big chunk of open space on the west side goes to Jack London State Historic Park. The big chunk of open space on the east side goes to the regional park. The buildings on the campus are quietly repurposed as housing, small local businesses and services, venues for community events and entertainment. A public trust - the Eldridge Trust - oversees that redevelopment. The trust is guided by people who know Glen Ellen well, who employ a gentle hand, who deal equitably and cooperatively with the sticky issues of traffic and revenue and utilities and...

And then I roll over and get up and get a glass of water.

An Eldridge Trust is not my idea - better minds than mine are at work here - but I've adopted it wholeheartedly. Trouble is, I have no way to implement this vision. I sit on committees and bumble, trying to suss out the ridiculous maze of political and bureaucratic boxes that we, the people of the state of California and the county of Sonoma, have created. C'mon, people, I want to shout. Another hoop? I listen to talk about how these buildings will need to come down, and what it will cost to bring that part of the infrastructure up to code. C'mon, people, I want to shout. We can fix it; don't let that get in the way! Perhaps most frustrating of all, I listen to folks who want to impose different utopian visions on the land, ones that will bring hard, unnatural change to the place. They don't know traffic, they don't know the trails, they don't know Glen Ellen. C'mon, people, I want to shout. Work with us here; don't *tread* on us.

The good news is the local devotion to Eldridge/SDC's open spaces has become obvious to those in the state of California who don't live here, but who will make the ultimate decisions about what happens here. They've seen us now, coming out by the hundreds, lupines and poppies and rattlesnakes and pumas, prepared to defend and steward what we cherish. As I sit in forums and workshops I watch as we shatter assumptions: This is no ordinary redevelopment, and we are no ordinary neighbors and caretakers.

I walked in the park and on the SDC land in early May with a friend. Up on the Suttonfield dam I turned this way and that, exclaiming my passion to the west and to the east, frustrated that preservation of these precious canyons and ridgelines and creek beds and meadows could possibly be this complicated. How could preservation not be a done deal? How could anyone not understand that the land's value lies not in how big a development it can support and how much money it can generate, but in how many souls it soothes? How could anyone not understand what I understand?

My tempest was tempered by my friend, whose activism is straightforward. She does what she knows how to do best, and she does it without committee. She has an idea, and she goes with it. She's spearheaded design of a T-shirt, and proceeds from the sales will be donated specifically for preservation of the SDC/Eldridge open space.

So I stood on the dam and embraced what I have become, a creature of committee, a messenger, a midnight thinker. No matter the frustrations, I vowed to persevere. My vision - the shared vision of a trust, utopian and practical and frustratingly convoluted - links me to my maverick neighbors and friends. I best serve them and the land we all love by staying the course.

I made another vow as I looked out over the shadowy green folds of Sonoma Mountain, with the Developmental Center, trees leafed out over low buildings, resting quietly at its base - a perfect picture, one that has inspired and healed us for a hundred years and should remain inspiring and healing for a hundred more. I will do what I do best: Write about it. I will embrace the witching hour; I will ruminate, I will gather it in and pour it back onto the page. I will inform. I will relay ideas

about how we can wrangle our way out of the ridiculous bureaucratic boxes that hold Eldridge and Glen Ellen hostage. I will look for ideas that can make this inevitable change feel less out of our control and less uncomfortable. After all, we are the state of California, and what's more, we know this part of California best. There's a star on our mountain, and it's not for sale. Don't *tread* on us.

Good night.

Tracy Salcedo is a writer living in Glen Ellen. Contact her through the Kenwood Press or at laughink@vom.com ([mailto:laughink@vom.com?subject=Kenwood Press article](mailto:laughink@vom.com?subject=Kenwood%20Press%20article)).

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