

## **New Year's Eve 2020 Fires at Malua Bay: Hope, Fear, Needing and Grieving**

Valerie Braithwaite, Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020

Yesterday I was one of the thousands who left the NSW south coast via Bega and Cooma, heading home to Canberra. Like many privileged boomers, as our 30-something children call us, we have retreated to Mosquito Bay to enjoy the climate, marvel at the natural wonder around us, and feel connected to community and place. We have dolphins, stingrays, a sea-eagle, birds of all kinds in our small, over-crowded patch of native trees. No mosquitos, well not too many. The bay takes its name from the little boats that transferred logs from the forest to the ships offshore bound for Sydney. Decades on we have surfboard riders, divers spearfishing, others snorkelling and exploring the wonders below the sea, and the odd swimmer who impresses by going from one side of the bay to the other and back again.

We have the keenest fishers (not us). I heard so many snippets of conversations among groups who were talking fish as the bushfire descended on us – what fish might you catch in these conditions with a smoke-filled dark sky? They go out in all weather conditions, launching a variety of floating vessels from our boat ramp. After all, it is the launching base for the 36-year-old Malua Bay Fishing Club. Fishers adopt head-down, do-not-disturb focus as they clean their catch on the special purpose stainless steel tables on the stony shore; then in the evening feed their scraps to the rays that raise their bodies above the water in the shallows as if to say “thanks for the feed”. They are not always so polite. Our Indigenous friends relate stories of stingrays stealing abalone from them before they can put them in their fishing pouch.

On the other side of the boat ramp, families and pets relax as they play on the small sandy beach. We have a much-loved café where locals have their favourite table for coffee, and a pizza van that visits weekly and generates its own Friday evening social community – the manager knows patrons by name. We run our dogs on the beach and rocky outcrop in early morning and evening and share stories and local gossip. It's a lovely peaceful, yet diverse place to be. We love our unit overlooking Mosquito Bay, two little bays away from Malua Bay central.

New Year's Eve Day in Malua Bay was demanding and more lastingly, a life lesson. This is not a tale of survival – we were lucky, the fire stopped around a kilometre away after whooshing down another corridor from the ridge to the coast, destroying some buildings and houses in what seems almost a vengeful fashion. Rather my tale is of what I learnt about potentially life-threatening circumstances, about grief and loss for others and us, if not self, about the importance of community and authorities, about help close by and help removed from the small geographical, social and psychological world we occupy in the most dangerous of situations.

Danger was clearly not far away on the evening of the 30<sup>th</sup> December according to the NSW RFS (Rural Fire Service) website. The Clyde Mountain fire was not under control, it was heading south and we were warned that all the small beach communities from Batemans Bay to Broulee needed to watch for fire embers and be prepared for a dangerous day ahead. So, we were on edge, alert if you will, but none of us knew what the next day would bring.

Next morning the RFS “fires near me” app showed two big fingers of fire coming toward our coastal villages from the newly raging Clyde Mountain fire. That information alerts and gets you moving. You contact family, frantically search the web for more information. None of this busy work gives you a realistic action plan as you stand in front of your house with hose in hand – will fire jump from the headland opposite to the north, or come up the gully from the west, or over the Malua Bay house tops to the south. Uncertainty and unpredictability are the operative words. No one knew what would happen. We had two ex-RFS volunteers on our street – one a

former captain. Both over 70 now, we listened to their every word – a serious situation, they agreed next morning, but best to stay put now and get ready as best we could.

Neighbours, young and old, were sharing everything from the logistics of hoses and buckets, batteries, best reception for radio stations, equipment of all kinds, right through to the intangibles that make up our social fabric. For a street with many holiday houses it was striking how we found each other and our permanent residents. When danger approaches many of us find a sense of sociability that we may not always think we have. Sharing knowledge, stories and reminders – did you turn off the gas? While buying the morning coffees – have you heard where things are at? A lot of stuff we knew, but new information too. The person taking our coffee order had been evacuated that morning from Mogo. Soon after she left the cafe – maybe not such a good sign. From our ex-RFA neighbour who had tried to go to Malua Bay IGA to buy batteries, we learnt that the ridge behind Malua Bay was on fire.

On the morning of New Year's Eve we were all well occupied: Hosing our house and those of absent neighbours, filling baths, bins and buckets with water, removing leaves, and talking within our family about how three older adults and two dogs might survive if the fire came and we could not manage. Out came the woollen blankets, dozens of towels were soaked in water - all ready to shove on windowsills and then used as protection as we slipped down the cliff face on our bums – or pulled down by the dogs! Such thoughts of how we might avoid burns and sprained or broken limbs by such a feat were suppressed, although we thought of that after the event, particularly if we had to do it in the dark. More immediate concerns focused on putting a ladder up on the front balcony safely to get water into the gutters of the upper level of our duplex. Way too high for clearing leaves, we hoped that soggy leaves would have a protective effect. We had already realised that plugging drains and filling them with water was not possible: the building was not designed for fire preparation of that kind.

Early on New Year's Day we were in a state that can only be described as heightened anxiety, but at the same time all our thinking was oriented to control of what might be ahead. Our neighbours (except the ex-RFS fire fighters) also were anxious. Anxiety was fair enough. Most of us had not done this before. As we shared tips with our young neighbours, we could not help but think that our physical agility and strength was not what it was twenty years ago. Maybe years of hearing and reading about bushfires gave us some extra wisdom, but then from all accounts the fires we were hearing about were unprecedented. Adapting knowledge to be prepared was not as straightforward as pamphlets and emergency announcers suggest.

Oscillating between preparations, listening to the radio, and checking the “fires near me” app brought a degree of controlled hyper-alertness. But then our angst was cast adrift! We lost services - no phone connection, either mobile or landline, no wi-fi, no electricity, no internet. Nor was the TELSTRA telephone booth at the boat ramp of any use. We were cut-off from the rest of the world, as if we were to be sacrificed to the elements. The street shared anxiety about broken contact with relatives and friends, some of whom lost connection midway through their phone updates. The radio, for which we were grateful as our lifeline for the most part, left us angry and frustrated. In turn we vocalized our annoyance at misguided announcers trying to do their job and help us (stupid was the word I can shamefully confess to using in our outbursts). First the commercial stations seemed best, then we fell back on the ABC. Time and time again we were told that if we were listening to them we were on the wrong station. We needed 603 AM. But nothing could be picked up there, not even static. We continued to listen with high expectations that someone would realise we were stranded and needed them to give us news of our local area. Nothing. Just Illawarra or Bega stations with instructions to those of us between Batemans Bay and Broulee to change stations or use the RFS app to find out what was happening in our area.

No electricity, no phone, no news; just us and our neighbours. The three-generation family with a baby across from us left for the Malua Bay evacuation centre, leaving one family member to defend. The young brother and sister down the road left for Malua Bay in the hope of getting a phone signal with promises that they would return with news. We decided to stay in our house, as did our older neighbours. We thought we were ready. We were quietly confident of our capacity to cope and took over hosing houses to the left and right.

As we now know, our anxiety turned to fear in another hour or so. A gusty wind brought oppressively heavy dark smoke with an orange and red glow. This suffocating hot blanket was visible from every window – red and brown mucky hot air, no longer looking smoky white. No longer could we trick our minds that it was heavy fog. We waited, watched and hoped with limited light, running up and down our three flights of stairs, seeing swirling ash and searching the front and back for where floating embers might land. We braced our less than agile bodies for a dash outside to scoop out a bucket of water for dousing flames from strategically placed containers of water. I later learnt that if the fire had come over us, that wait would have been so much worse – darker, with the fire roaring and temperatures soaring. I also learnt that leaves could bake and ignite in an instant and needed hosing when smoldering, before they were burning. And now I think in spite of our best efforts at clothing ourselves safely, covered from head to foot in ‘natural fibre’, our clothes were probably woefully inadequate for the job. Our gloves with a synthetic rubbery substance sprayed over the fingers were for genteel gardening. We were privileged baby boomers after all – our clothing was not of the thick, protective quality needed for serious outside work, or fighting fires.

It is easy to understand the power of grapevine chatter, and when available social media, in these situations. We craved information and anything that might ease our uncertainty. We needed conversation with others. We needed something from outside to think about, to talk about. “They said” data seemed better than no data. Ironically, the stories that came back to us from the evacuation centre seemed in retrospect now to be not too far from the truth - although newspaper accounts have varied from what our neighbours told us. When our young neighbours returned they relayed horror stories from the evacuation centre. They sought coolness with many others on the open ground floor of a newly constructed apartment block at Malua Bay beach. The fire came down the ridge towards them when they were there. Explosions were heard, presumably gas bottles, and everyone was told to run for the beach. The huge numbers meant people were pushed into the water further than they wanted. Our mother and daughter opposite with their baby were among those being pushed out into the ocean by the crowds swarming the beach. They returned to the relative safety of our street totally traumatised.

We learned that other pieces of intelligence that seemed unbelievable at the time were absolutely correct as well as shocking. The loss of the Malua Bay bowls club, where we had celebrated a birthday a few nights before, and had admired the tall trees and bushland setting was no more. Houses were lost as well. Within minutes those on the beach at Malua Bay watched as Mackenzie’s beach headland transformed from what looked like a spot fire to a wall of flame. Rosedale too was alight. “It’s all gone” our young friend said. Lilli Pilli too, she had heard, to our north. The loss of so many houses nestled discretely and respectfully among beautiful tall gums to the south and north left us with a heavy heart. We had friends with houses in both places.

A sleepless night brought little improvement – either to our psychological state or our physical surroundings. The mutterings and public relations broadcasts of many politicians and providers of electricity and telecommunications were so out of touch, ill-informed, illogical and blatantly uncaring that one almost felt contempt for those in authority whose decisions shaped our lives. Our young neighbours left for Batemans Bay. The smoke was heavy. We could barely see the other side of the bay. And our marker of reasonable air quality, the Tollgate islands, was

completely invisible. New Year's Day was full of uncertainty, of scenario planning of what now seems like ridiculous complexity, of forgetting where we put things, in short, of feeling far less in control.

By afternoon the smoke had lifted a little. A drive to Malua Bay evacuation centre seemed sensible to see if we could find out what was going on. We could register with the Red Cross so family and friends knew we were ok. I wrote out a list of all our questions to make sure nothing was forgotten in the stress of the moment. Central to our mission was deciding whether we should try to keep our 10.30 appointment with the Mitsubishi dealer in Bateman's Bay to find out why our engine light was coming on, and if our car was safe to drive. We had begun to ask ourselves if we should head home to Canberra.

As we parked the car on the headland and walked down the steps to the beach, a sea breeze lifted our spirits. The smoke was not so dense close to the sea. Maybe we could cope. Maybe we were panicking too much. We headed for the surf lifesaving club, our evacuation hub, which we noticed was strangely quiet. It had closed. The evacuation centre was now Hanging Rock, Bateman's Bay. Joining the exodus to Batemans Bay was not an appealing option. The ever-present smoke could not be good for anyone's lungs as we sat in a traffic line chewing up our already marginal petrol supply. As we discussed options, or more accurately imagined possibilities, we noticed that Sylvan Street where houses had been lost along with Club Malua was barricaded and guarded by three police. They were keeping people out, presumably worried about safety and looters. Maybe they could tell us what was going on.

Information can change your choices. With their informal advice and a chat with a local who was hanging around but being prevented from entering the area, we started to see possibilities for getting back to Canberra. We could use side roads and detours that the radio station and official sources had not considered – or did not want to share publicly. We learned from the radio that fire in Batemans Bay meant that road closures prevented access to the place where we were to have the car checked next day. Maybe they had been affected by the fire. There seemed to be a traffic nightmare in the town as well. Again, the comradeship of our street came to our rescue. A late afternoon casual conversation with a neighbour produced a diagnostic tool that we could use ourselves to interrogate the cause of the car's engine warning light. It did not seem too serious. With three quarters of a tank of petrol in one car and more in the other, we decided it was time to hang up our fire-fighting boots and leave. The thought of going through it all again as weather conditions deteriorated and the risk of further fire increased was asking too much of us.

As much as we love our seaside unit, our sense of can-do-ness, of our capacity to control our fate had dramatically dissipated. I did not blame myself for not being resilient enough. I just felt that even though the three of us had responded well over the past 48 hours, we had reached our limit. We were tired. Without electricity and a back-up generator, our tank water for the outside taps and hoses would shrink to a trickle. I found myself changing gear. Instead of thinking what we could do, I looked to those who were saving lives and property across the country. I listened and watched for the planes and helicopters overhead, checking to see if they had a water bucket and hoping that they would come back and not give up on us. Like the lyrebird in a neighbour's tree and the ibis on another's roof, I just sat there, with sudoku and crossword in hand, stuck in my own thoughts, fear and uncertainty.

We were struggling with next steps. The next morning we would make an early start for home, and hope that the firies and the pilots would protect our beach house. I learnt the lesson of needing others in authority to trust. Not that they could promise to save my house. Just that they would do everything within their power to try.

We left our place with sadness and trepidation for the horror conditions that are predicted for tomorrow, Saturday 4th. Maybe that was the last time we would see our beach house whole. But as we embarked on our eight-and-a-half-hour journey back to Canberra I felt we had made the right decision. We had done our best, but now we had to hope that nature would grant us some luck and that our extraordinary air and land defenders would do the rest. As we drove through country that had been ravaged by fire, we saw evidence of how tirelessly these fire fighters had worked to save property and stock. Wooden houses still standing amidst burnt fields. House after house standing surrounded by melted plastic bins and burnt out cars and machinery. The big things had somehow been saved.

This was not always the case of course. The scene of a couple, our age, with a pink laundry basket looking through the twisted metal and remains of their house for some little reminders of their lives broke our hearts. We drove through country with irregular patterns of black and beige patches, where stumps were smouldering, and where sheep and cattle were feeding on whatever vegetation remained. The animals were surprisingly calm and resigned, maybe like us shocked and exhausted. We joined the main highway at Cobargo and saw the remains of old buildings that looked so solid when we passed through a week before. The old sturdy fireplaces rose from the ashes as a reminder of a once charming, historic place. And then there were the constant reminders of our lost wildlife. So many wombats lifeless on the edge of the road.

As we reached the top of Brown Mountain with a red-orange haze to our right I dared think for a moment “we have made it”. Such a foolish, small minded thought really. No-one triumphs. There is no happy ending for the country. The tragedy is too vast for people, houses, businesses, infrastructure, fauna and flora. The stories of loss and suffering are never-ending. It is not possible to control the sense of grief that comes out of all of this. With grief comes anger, and so often people act out these feelings through blame. Who will mend us? How will we mend?

I do not know where to begin to answer that question. I wish authorities that are distant from us would care more, would feel more responsible to lead in setting things right. To me leadership is caring and reaching out in practically useful ways to help each of us, our wildlife, our country. I have no doubt such leadership and acts of good faith abound among communities, firefighters, emergency workers and those closer to the ground. I don't think institutions are doomed. The ABC learned from their early mistakes with their fire messaging – they acknowledged they got it wrong and made amends. Institutions can say they are sorry. I have less confidence, however, in those institutions that are preoccupied with their own world, lost in rules, regulations, protocols, public relations exercises, demarcation disputes, business plans and efficiency measures. When we are in danger, all these things seem distractions and avoidance strategies for not solving problems and meeting human needs. Now I understand first-hand low trust in systems that fail to notice us, let alone help us.

As we sat gridlocked in a stream of traffic on Brown Mountain, we heard a bell-like sound. My curiosity was so great I wound down the window in spite of the heavy smoke to listen again. Bell birds were calling. I thought of Henry Kendall's famous poem and his mention of water and mosses and mountain streams. I could see no sign of these in our burnt parched land. Maybe the bell birds know something that I don't, that we don't know. Maybe tomorrow, or the next day, or the next, will not be as bad as we fear. Maybe the rain will fall, and we will start to heal. Maybe we don't need high up authorities to be blamed, restructured and forced to change their spots. Maybe we sideline them psychologically and consolidate a new vision on the ground, connecting with our country and each other, supporting new leaders and new leadership styles. Then our institutions may evolve to be more successful in working for all of us.