

Memories of the Provincetown Fire, February 10, 1998

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I will never forget the night of the Provincetown fire. At the time, my partner, Alice Kelly, and I lived on West Vine Street. For some reason, I had ventured out onto the porch and noticed an orange glow in the sky to the east. Leaning across the railing, I realized the glow was quite large and seemed to be just a few blocks away. I called to Alice and we began to smell smoke as well. We thought that there was a fire at the Coast Guard Station because it looked so close. We put on coats and headed down Commercial Street. It was just after dinnertime, although I don't remember the exact time. It was clear and cold, but with little wind.

As we got closer to town, we saw people hurrying past us. This was not difficult, as Alice was 8 ½ months pregnant with our son who, in fact, was born six days later. Finally, someone coming from downtown told us that there was a fire. When I asked where, she said in the center of town. When I asked if the Meeting House was involved, she said, "Yes."

At that point, I told Alice I would meet up with her later and I began to run. As I got closer, the smell became stronger and I soon came upon crowds of people, stopped from going further by yellow police tape. In true Provincetown fashion, many were ignoring the tape and continuing ahead or going out to the beach to investigate. I ran up Carver Street to Bradford and down Bradford to the walkway that runs along the west side of the Meeting House. I remember my heart pounding and I remember that I was praying over and over, for people, for the town, for the Meeting House. As I ran down the walkway, the glow from the fire was intense. First, I saw garden hoses attached to the Meeting House and realized someone was already hosing down the roof. This later turned out to be Allen Gallant. Then, as I came around to the front of the building, I saw several figures silhouetted against the orange and I saw high flames engulfing Whaler's Wharf and the Crown & Anchor. The figures I had seen were all Meeting House members, standing about 20 feet in front of the building. They were silent, some were praying, some were sending Reiki, some were crying. I know that Raif Greco and Sheila Ryan were there. We hugged and cried. It was silent and noisy at once. No one was speaking but there was the roar of the fire and the water and the equipment as well as the shouts of the fire fighters. It was surreal and terrifying. We did not know at that time if anyone was in the building or what had happened.

First, I checked on the Meeting House. Apparently, no one had had a key, so Allen had broken in, I believe through the side door. The building was fine. But fire balls the size of soft balls were still flying onto the lawn and smaller ones were soaring overhead. I read later that some of these started small fires on High Pole Hill. There were people and equipment everywhere, including a fire engine right in front of the Meeting House. Fire fighters were using the front part of the lawn and I remember it being quite muddy.

Others came, or may have already been there...Candi McDonald, Kevin Doherty, Ginnine Principe, Christy Baker. Candi was instrumental in bringing news about the fire because her partner, Warren Alexander, was acting Fire Chief that night. I was the President of the Board of Directors at the time and Candi was Vice-President. Once we

got through the initial shock and realized that this fire was going to take a long time to extinguish, we talked about how we could be most useful. We decided to open the Meeting House sanctuary to those who may need quiet space to pray or meditate, to open the bathroom to those in need, and to prepare food and drink for the fire fighters. The Red Cross vans were not able to keep up because there were so many fire fighters. We later learned every Cape town sent engines.

We used what we had available in the pantry, supplemented by donations from Oliver at Cumberland Farms. We set up a table on the lawn close to Commercial Street with the coffee and sandwiches as well as water and cookies. Some of us worked in the kitchen, some spread the word to the fire fighters, and others actually took trays out to the fire fighters at the fire.

One fond memory from that awful night...One of the women taking coffee around to the fire fighters returned and said, "Wow-there are some really cute guys here!" And off she went, smiling, for her next rounds. A couple of minutes later, one of the men who had been serving came back and said, "Wow-there are some really cute guys here!"

At one point, I took a break and walked around the Marine Supplies building to the beach behind. It was sobering. The fire was devastating to see from Commercial Street, but the immensity of it was so apparent from the beach. It still amazes me that they were able to contain it. Thank goodness there was not a strong wind that night. You could still hear, hours into the evening, the fire cracking, pieces of the building collapsing, the sizzling as the water hit. It was hot and eerie and overwhelmingly sad.

We kept the kitchen going well into the night, closing up about 3:00 a.m. I know that Raif and Candi stayed the whole evening. There were others who helped out as well and I regret that I cannot remember the names of everyone. I know that Rev. Justice did not come into town but was aware of the fire.

The following Sunday, we had a moment of silence and many spoke of their feelings regarding the fire. Many contributed to the fund that was set up for the vendors who had lost their artwork and livelihoods. The Meeting House considered offering use of the lawn for displaced artists from Whaler's Wharf to "set up shop" the following summer. This did not happen, as the owner of Whaler's Wharf set up a temporary sales area on the open lot where the building once stood.

On the Sunday following the suicide of the night watchman from Whaler's Wharf, we again shared a moment of silence and congregants expressed their feelings during Joys and Concerns.

The fire was life-changing for many people in many ways. In terms of the Meeting House, I realized how fortunate we were to still have our sacred space and how that building has survived so much. It truly felt like blessed ground to me. I was proud of the way we pulled together and opened up the building to help others in the community. I was touched by the acts of love that night. Many of us grieved for a long time and to this day, I still remember the fire every time I walk by Whaler's Wharf.