

## THE QUAKE OF '89

The Loma Prieta earthquake shook San Francisco on Tuesday, October 17, at 5:04 pm.

On a normal day I would have been working in my office on the 23rd floor of One Maritime Plaza. But I had left my office early to get a haircut. I had a meeting Wednesday morning at Pixar to start a new project in computer imaging, and I wanted to be home in time to watch the start of the third World Series game between the Giants and A's.

After the haircut, I arrived at my town house in the Golden Gateway Center near The Embarcadero piers a little before 5 pm. I changed clothes and was on my way downstairs when the first tremblor hit. I saw the walls shaking, and heard the house groaning. I knew instantly what was happening.

I had been through many earthquakes in my 40 years in California. Most of the time, the shakes come one after another, like waves, each one increasing in severity. By the time you are ready to become truly alarmed it is all over.

Not this time. The waves kept coming. Each time I thought that surely, this will be the last one. But it wasn't. Another jolt came, and it was still worse. The walls moved back and forth so hard that pictures started to fall. The floor lifted and fell. As I looked down the stair well I could see the banister rail moving back and forth. Downstairs my wife, Marilyn, was yelling, "Oh! Oh!"

I believed then, and do yet, that our house was designed to survive an earthquake, but as my alarm built up with the duration and increasing severity of the quake I was not so sure. I could almost see and feel the ceiling falling, the walls caving in, the stairs collapsing.

Then it was over.

I flew downstairs. Marilyn was standing under the arch opening into the living room. We ran to the windows to see if any of the 25-story office buildings surrounding us had fallen or been damaged; to see if the elevated freeway were still standing, if the piers had fallen into the sea.

Everything looked normal. The buildings seemed undamaged, people were walking along the sidewalks and over the pedestrian bridges. Cars were going up the on ramp to the bridge. Traffic seemed to be moving over the bridge. (We couldn't see the other end where a top section of the two-deck bridge had buckled, crushing commuters in their cars.) We saw no smoke, heard no sirens. Bums were sitting on the grass in the park. The scene was a normal weekday afternoon in San Francisco.

We turned around to survey the damage to our living room. The table lamps were on the floor, several knick-knacks had fallen over and were broken. A few books were on the floor. The biggest loss was on the patio, where part of our fountain, the statue of Zeus and his three daughters, had toppled over and smashed. Underneath it was a broken pot of azaleas.

We still had electric power. On the TV set, tuned to the World Series, Al Michaels at Candlestick Park was having some trouble with his equipment, and the signal was starting to break-up. Michaels said he didn't know if anyone could hear him, then the screen went black.

Marilyn's first awareness of the quake came at the same time as the rest of the world -- by seeing it on the TV. The earthquake began 60 miles south of San Francisco, near Loma Prieta Peak, and hit Candlestick to the North a second or two before reaching us downtown. She was in the kitchen with the TV sound turned up loud enough to hear. Suddenly she heard people screaming, then Al Michaels saying there was an earthquake. As she dashed into the living room she was almost thrown to the floor.

When the power went off calm returned. We picked up the overturned knick-knacks, put the books and lamps back on the shelves and tables. We went out onto the patio to clean up the pieces of concrete that had broken off the fountain.

I turned on our small battery-operated radio. Without thinking, I tuned it to the Giant's station, KNBR. Ron Fairly, one of the Giants' announcers, was saying, "Things moved around pretty good out here," a statement he repeated at least a dozen times over the next few minutes. Ron repeated a few other statements over and over, too, such as: "The ballplayers are standing around on the field.", and "We don't know when play will be resumed", until he was mercifully replaced by the KNBR news staff downtown.

It was then, from the radio, that we learned how far from a typical afternoon in San Francisco this had been. For the next six hours we listened in mounting sorrow to the toll the earthquake had taken: the damage to the Bay Bridge, the huge fires in the Marina District, the collapse of elevated sections of the freeways, 60 people killed. We heard, too, with mounting pride, reports of the calmness and heroism of the people here. We began to realize that it would be days -- if ever -- before we were back to normal.

With no power, Marilyn couldn't cook the casserole she had planned for dinner, but she had some left-over leek and sausage pie. We heated it up in the charcoal grill, and finished a bottle of red wine. As the sun set, Marilyn got out her candle stubs and lit them. I fished out our camping and sailing flashlights, and our Coleman lantern.

The telephones were still working, so we began to call, and were called by, family and friends from next door to the Atlantic Ocean. Marilyn called her bridge group to find a substitute for a game she was to have played on Wednesday east of the now impassable Bay Bridge.

For the next couple of days we continued to have calls from friends and family. That turned out to be one of the nice things about the Quake of '89. A neighbor said, "it's better than Christmas."

Just before we climbed into bed, we went out onto our balcony for a last look around. With the power off, San Francisco was dark. The few emergency lights here and there seemed feeble in the blackness. There were no street lights, no traffic lights, no lighted windows. Washington Street, running from our house up and over Russian Hill, was dark and deserted. Without its gaudy neon signs of Chinese characters, Chinatown had disappeared into the dark skyline. The Bay Bridge was barely visible against the strangely starry sky. Eerie. Never had we seen The City like that.

Below us a woman walked across into the park with a flashlight and her dog on a leash. Some things must go on, no matter what. The woman shone her flashlight on bushes and trees as she and the dog passed them, I suppose trying to encourage the dog to finish its business. "My, isn't that a lovely bush; what a nice tree," I could imagine her saying as the light hit it each one.

The dog paid no attention. He kept his nose down, straining against the leash, oblivious of the dark city, looking for something only dogs understand. I wondered if the dog had become agitated just before the earthquake.

Wednesday morning I was unsure about whether I could make my appointment in San Rafael, at 8:30 am, but the traffic reports were good, so I gave it a try. I drove the five miles to the Golden Gate Bridge through the city side streets because the main route, under the weakened Embarcadero Freeway and through the fire-ravaged Marina was closed.

Because there were no traffic lights, all vehicles had to stop at each intersection, as though it were a four-way stop. I must have stopped at 50 intersections on the drive to the bridge. Every driver I encountered was courteous, alternating with each other for right-of-way through the intersection. There was not a hint of gridlock. When a driver needed to make a left turn, the other drivers would pause and wave the turner through, and the wavee would give a highball. Truck drivers were especially courteous, often giving the right of way to autos at an intersection until a motorist would wave the truck through. Pedestrians, too, were considerate, waiting to cross intersections in groups, and then pausing again to let traffic by while forming new groups. As the groups formed, motorists would stop to wave them across.

But when I returned home in the afternoon after my meeting, it was to a different world. The traffic lights still were off, the traffic was no heavier than it had been earlier, but the courtesy that had characterized the morning commute was gone. Drivers tailgated through intersections until forced by cross traffic to halt. Grid lock developed everywhere. Truck drivers bullied their way into turns and double parked with abandon. Pedestrians streamed into crosswalks in single file refusing to concede the streets to motorists until they were almost shoved out of the way by honking drivers. Going back over the same route that I drove in the morning, took three times as long.

San Francisco was getting back to normal.

Wednesday night there still was no electric power, and no hot water. We were lucky, at least we had cold water. Some of our neighbors in the surrounding apartments, 24 floors up, had no water at all, so no toilets functioned. But here, still in the midst of catastrophe, the courtesy and helpfulness I had experienced in the morning commute remained turned on. All through our housing complex neighbors were sharing food, water, and batteries. Our health club remained open all night so even non-members could access the toilets. Nearby merchants brought in extra supplies of water, flashlights, and batteries, which they sold at cost.

Marilyn got her casserole out and we cooked it in our camp stove oven. We invited our neighbors over to share it with us, who brought some cold sliced chicken breasts with a mustard dip for an appetizer, and the remains of a lemon mousse cake for desert.

We ate dinner on the patio, for the first time in more than a year. The usual chilly evening wind that blows at us all summer long through the San Francisco fog stayed out at sea. The night was balmy, even for October, where balmy is normal. There were no city sounds, no machinery noises, no cars, no trucks, no busses. It was so quiet we could hear the talking of the neighbors sitting out on their balconies in the high rises.

Early Thursday morning the power came back on. By Thursday afternoon we had hot water. Marilyn and I were able to shower and wash hair for the first time since Tuesday morning. Boy, did that feel good.

Ten days later the World Series resumed at Candlestick Park. Friends who had season tickets, and had been at the game when the earthquake struck, were unable to attend the postponed game, so they gave their tickets to Marilyn and me. When we arrived at our seats, we found ourselves in the midst of an entire section that was having a re-union. Though they had not known each other before the earthquake, now all of them were earthquake survivors. Having shared together a frightening experience, they had developed a camaraderie that transcended the thrill of a World Series game.