

## Evacuation and Preparedness – a Personal Story

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Twenty-three years ago, an arson fire erupted in the hills above Glendale Community College, and before the day was over, 46 homes were destroyed, 20 more were partially burned, and millions of dollars of damage was done.

My house was close enough to the fire that I could see burning embers blowing by in the wind. I hastily grabbed what I could think of in the panic of the moment (car keys, cats, a few odds and ends) and prepared to evacuate.

As it turned out, I wasn't evacuated, and in retrospect, I realized that I was poorly prepared. As an ex-Navy pilot, I knew what I needed was a *checklist*!

Here is why a checklist is important: when you are in trouble and facing a stressful situation, it's impossible to remember everything and to do things in a fast and efficient manner. Thinking it through beforehand and writing it all down in advance will insure that if you do someday have to evacuate, you'll have everything you need.

### DISCLAIMER

I'm not a disaster expert, so what I am writing may be full of hot air (and comments are welcome!). I am just relating to you what I did and what my reasoning was, for what it's worth!

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR MAKING YOUR CHECKLIST

**Timing:** First off, think of how much notice you might have to evacuate. If you SEE a potentially hazardous situation (like a fire a couple of miles away), but have not been given the evacuation order, you'll have a lot more time to prepare. On the other hand, if the police knock on your door and ask you to leave, you may only have minutes to prepare. So, with this in mind, my checklist has a 5 minute sublist, a 15 minute sublist and a 1 hour sublist.

**Logistics:** What vehicle are you going to use to evacuate and is it already fueled up to go? It would be bad luck to have the SUV with the gas tank on empty parked next to the fully-fueled Mini Cooper. Can't take much in the Mini! In any case, what you do put on your list may be limited by the size of your vehicle; if you fill it up first with relatively unimportant but bulky items, you'll regret it!

**Work Flow:** From experience, running back and forth from room to room to gather things wastes a lot of time and takes a lot of energy, especially if you live in a multi-story house. I wrote my checklist with this in mind, starting with the garage: First, move the car out in to the driveway and position it so that it is easy to load. Then while you are at it, collect the things you might want out of the garage from the 5-minute checklist (flashlight, couple of bottles of water and sleeping bag on my list.) Then proceed in an orderly fashion through the house one room at a time, so you don't have to spend a lot of time running back and forth between rooms.

(IMPORTANT TIP: The only running around between rooms you need to do might be to capture the cat! Do that first, using your best “don’t worry, we’re not going to the vet” voice, and get the cat settled in the carrier BEFORE you start running around the house looking for things and freaking kitty out!)

(Another GOOD TIP: Go to Staples or Office Depot and buy a dozen or so “records boxes” – these store flat (under the bed, in the back of the closet) and assemble in seconds, without tape, into perfect containers to dump in the tax record files, family pictures, the collection of small irreplaceable items, etc. Pre-position these in any room you have small items or papers.)

**Priorities:** One way to make your list is to first go from room to room in your house and write down all the things you would like to take (say with an hour’s notice) in each room. (TIP: while you are doing this, shoot video of all your rooms while you describe the items, especially the large items and things you may not be able to take with you in the event of a disaster. This will help in subsequent insurance claims... from experience, the insurance companies WILL try to shortchange you at every turn unless you can prove what you had.)

Now sit down with your list and evaluate whether or not all the things you listed will actually fit in your car, assuming you had the full hour to pack. Then decide on what you ABSOLUTELY NEED and assign those items to the 5-minute category. The rest can go into the 15-minute or 1-hour category depending on how you feel.

Absolute needs for the 5-minute list might include:

- Pets
- Grandma
- Medicine (prescription meds, AND it might be handy to grab the Excedrin and Sudafed while you’re at it) – have a shaving/toiletry/makeup kit packed as if you were going on a trip, and you can just grab it.
- Baby stuff. Baby.
- Passports or any other critical identification or documentation that might be impossible to replace
- Laptop (ok, I’m a geek)
- Easily retrieved and packed sentimental items (pictures, wedding albums)
- Records: Marriage / Divorce / Death certificates
  - Here’s a critical item in the electronic era: have a printed list of your passwords, all bank and financial accounts numbers, and your address book / contact list. If you are in an evacuation center you might not have access to the internet or a computer, so having a printed list of these things is handy. Keep it locked up with your passport!

Remember, you only have 5 minutes, you might not even remember where everything is, so take care of you immediate family health and safety needs first and worry about sentimental items later.

15-minute items on my list then extended into the more sentimental items category, or the more pragmatic. Grab only a few days worth of clothing. Remember a coat. Grab your cell phone charger, Kindle or iPod or games for the kids so that a few days in an evacuation center or motel will be easier to bear. Have a first aid kit in the garage and grab that. If you have a computer backup disk, get that.

**Sentimentality versus pragmatic thinking:** One thing I kept asking myself when I was making my checklist is “can this be replaced by insurance?” and if the answer was yes, it usually dropped off my list. So I didn’t worry too much about clothes. (Then again, I pretty much hate all my clothes anyway..)

**What do you do with your list?** OK, this sounds silly, but trust me, it works. Print out a copy of your list for almost every room in the house, and keep it where you can find it in each room. Then when you are going from room to room collecting things, you don’t have to have your list in hand (when you will surely leave it and then go to the next room and then have to go back and get it!) The other advantage to this is that you can assign family members to each take a room and they’ll all have their own list to work from.

**Computers, Photos and Backups:** Many of us now have most of our pictures, personal and financial records and music on a computer. It is worth subscribing to an on-line backup service (CrashPlan+ (the most cost-effective), Mozy, Carbonite, etc.) – for a few dollars a month you can have all of your documents, photos, and music backed up automatically, securely, and you can recover them from another computer if you have to. Inventory the software you have on your computer (for insurance purposes), and if you have to replace your family computer, insurance buys the new one and new software, and restoring your personal data from “the cloud” is a snap. If you aren’t comfortable with cloud storage, then large-capacity external hard drives are inexpensive. (The down side to this is that you need to have additional backup software, and you have to be home to grab the hard drive in case of disaster.) Having all my stuff backed up in the “cloud” meant that my home computer could be at the bottom of the one hour list.

**What if disaster befalls us without even 5 minutes warning?** A last preparedness note is worth discussing; what happens if the asteroid hits your house while you are at work or you wake up in the middle of the night and find your bed floating down the street? In addition to the “cloud storage” backup of your computer files, you should have an on-line record of your wallet or non-electronic papers of importance. I have used my cell phone or digital camera to snap pictures of my passport, driver’s license, and all my credit cards (front and back), and I save those pictures to my free Google account. This is a great tip for travelers too – if your wallet is stolen and your luggage is lost and you are stranded in Tahiti, GREAT! No, really, in that case you can borrow a hotel computer, log on to your “cloud storage” account, and print copies of your documents to take to the US consulate or embassy, have the numbers of your credit cards to call in as stolen and to get the numbers of ones you left at home that you may still be able to use at the bar in Tahiti.

**Conclusion:** I hope this helps you think about disaster preparedness, and I hope that the strategies I have found effective are useful to you as well. When we had the recent fire at the bottom of the canyon, I was able to try out my evacuation list, and even by myself I was able to get the car loaded up and ready to go in short order. Being prepared isn’t all that hard, and in the panic of the moment, following your checklist and doing things in an orderly fashion will give you great peace of mind if you have to leave for safer ground.