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Earthquake: My Priorities Get Real

Recent sensational news stories in the New Yorker and Portland Monthly have done a great job scaring much of the West Coast out of its wits, though to be fair, I hear more fear coming from recent transplants than from those of us who have had earthquake drills every school year since we were tiny. It's undeniable though that the effects of a mega-quake on Portland would be pretty dire. Thinking about this earthquake has made me consider whether I would be ready or not, and what my priorities would be should the earth try to shake us off like fleas on a dog. My priorities, of course, depend on my location at the time.

I fervently hope that I'm not at school when it happens. My obvious priority in this case is to make sure my kids are safe and have a place to go, which means I could potentially be stuck at Franklin for a very long time. What if someone gets hurt? Do I know enough to take care of us? What if kids panic and run? Should I tackle them? I swear to you, reader, if I get hit in the head by some 1960's era fluorescent light because I have to tackle some dumb kid who doesn't just get under his or her desk like s/he's supposed to, I will be one angry ghost. I'll haunt that kid all the way to Harvard. Jerk.

If I'm anywhere besides school, my first priority has to be getting in touch with my mom and dad. I know we're supposed to all call my aunt in California in case the phone lines are tied up. What if the calls don't go through? My mom gets sick easily when she's worried about my brother or me. If I can't get a call through, I have to find my way down to Tualatin, which means crossing the Willamette. What a pain. It'll be full of bridge debris, gasoline, spilled chemicals from Ross Island Gravel, floating cars, and I shudder to think what else. And how to get there? The roads will be a mess. The only solution is to roll up the kayak, tie it on the back of my bike, and get the heck out of Portland. Once I'm at their house it's all ok - they have a well, and where there's water, there's life.

Hopefully I'm at my house, and this earthquake doesn't happen until after May 2016 or so. That's how long it's going to take for me to save enough money to bolt my house down. Five thousand bucks, can you believe? I hope NW Seismic writes the author of that New Yorker article a big fat thank-you letter for

all the business they're getting. After I make sure all the people I know are safe, my biggest priority has to be defending my house. If that sucker goes down and I'm uninsured, that's bankruptcy. Not to mention I JUST finally put all my books away.

Finally, once I'm sure my kids, my folks, and my roommates are all ok, it will be time to check on the neighbors. I am deeply disturbed by the sentiment among my students that in a disaster, everyone will be out to get everyone else. In my experience, big natural disasters bring people together. The best defense, after all, is to appear unafraid, calm, and confident. As soon as the ground stops shaking, I will go check on my old lady neighbor Mei. Then I'll go next door to the family with the kid who is always crying. Then I'll check in with the nice older couple whose backyard shares my back fence. Then I'll check with the couple my age whose party I crashed once (but probably not the other neighbor who was there and tried to hit on me - he's on his own). Then I'll check with the solid family across the street. If anyone's house is damaged, and mine is not, I will invite them to stay. After all, there's safety in numbers, that first night. This is Lents, after all. I'm not saying all people are kind and benevolent. But what kind of person am I, if through my fear I fail to help those in need? A person who had better get clocked by a brick, I think.