

# Out of the ASHES

After losing her home in the Palisades fire last year, Unplug Meditation founder Suze Yalof Schwartz discovered something miraculous in the rubble—and in herself.

I still can't believe what I found that day. It was months after the fires that devastated California in January 2025. I was digging through what was left of my home in the Pacific Palisades—just ash, metal, and the charred rooms that once held our life—when I noticed something white peeking out from under a pile of debris. At first, I thought I imagined it. Nothing survived the Palisades fire. Nothing. Not my furniture, not my appliances, not the things I thought were solid and permanent. But there it was: a curve of gray dust-covered porcelain, like it was trying to get my attention.

I bent down in my hazmat suit and swiped away the soot with my glove. Suddenly I was holding one of the salad bowls from my wedding china—florist Christian Tortu's Verdures pattern for Raynaud. The china I had loved for 25 years but barely used. "How?" I said out loud. Because really, how could this happen? How did china survive when walls didn't?

My friend Jen, who was walking by giving an out-of-town guest the street's destruction tour, was also in shock. Fortunately, she was just in time to capture the moment on camera and share my disbelief.

I kept digging. Another bowl. Then another. And another. I had 14 bowls stacked in a cupboard that once sat in my dining room, and 12 made it through the wildfire. There was no sign of the cupboard, but the bowls were perfectly intact—well, almost. When I turned them over, I noticed a faint reddish tint baked into the backs, almost like the fire had left its signature on them.

They weren't flawless anymore, but honestly, they were more beautiful to me because of it.



They had a story now. And here's the part that really got me: I barely used the bowls pre-wildfire. I was always saving them for special occasions, but life moves fast, and every special occasion, I would opt for my simple (dishwasher-safe) pieces over the gorgeous china. Suddenly, I was standing in the ashes of my former home holding the bowls I never let myself enjoy.

The message was loud and clear: Don't wait. Use the good china. Celebrate while you can. Life doesn't wait for the perfect moment—and neither should we.

But there was something deeper, and I questioned the meaning in the moment. These bowls were delicate, yes, but they survived extreme heat. They survived the collapse of

● Suze Yalof Schwartz stands in the ruins of her home after the Palisades fire. Hers was among the last homes to burn—the fire stalled at her street.

PHOTOS: SUZE YALOF SCHWARTZ; (PORTRAIT) COURTESY OF UNPLUG



walls that had stood since my home was built in 1948. They survived the total destruction. They survived while sturdier things didn't.

The name of the pattern, Verdures, means "lush greenery"—life coming back. How perfect is that? I kept thinking about the double meaning: fragile but strong, damaged but beautiful, survived but irrevocably changed.

The question became: What does one do with 12 fire-kissed salad bowls that are the only (and suddenly the most meaningful) objects you own? You display them. I didn't want to tuck the bowls into another cabinet. I wanted them where I could see them every single day. A reminder of resilience. Proof of survival. A new belief that beauty can rise right out of destruction.

I hung the bowls in a clean grid on a hallway wall in my new rental apartment using (rental-friendly) picture-hanging strips. They looked



modern, intentional, almost like art. My new next-door neighbor asked where I bought them. "Fire sale," I said jokingly, and then I laughed a little.

But two nights after I hung the plates, I woke up to a crash. My heart was pounding; I thought someone broke into my apartment. I walked down the hall—and saw two of the bowls had fallen off the wall and shattered across the hardwood floor. I just stared at the pieces for a moment. After all that—this?



I recalled kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with gold. The idea is the imperfections become part of the object's beauty, that the object is more precious, even, because it lived through something and has the scars to prove it.

We don't survive hard things without breaking somewhere.

Fires, loss, grief, upheaval—it all leaves its mark. We're all more fragile than we look, and also so much stronger than we ever imagined. Maybe the point is to honor and own the breaks. To let the imperfections, the scars, the damage become part of our story.

In the middle of all this, I wasn't crumbling the way I thought I would. I had the remaining 10 bowls professionally rehung and thought about something Matthew Reyes said to me after the fire. (Matthew is one of our beloved teachers at Unplug, the meditation studio I founded in 2014 after moving to Los Angeles from New York.)

"It's almost like you were made for this," he said, noting how meditation prepared me for this moment, how our meditation practice is the ground we stand on when everything else falls apart. And that's exactly how it felt.

All those mornings on the Unplug app, the quiet sits, the simple reset of "close your eyes and begin again"—it wasn't just meditation. It was preparation. Not for calm (though that's a bonus), but for resilience. And to remember that even when life burns us, cracks us into pieces, we are not forever broken. We can always put ourselves back together, piece by piece. ■