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Stories 4 Wings

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Teamworking

The Rescue





My name is Simon, and I have been a firefighter for more than 40 years. I will retire in a few weeks and have lately been recalling many situations I have been through during all those years. Some were very hard, some very easy, but all were significant for some reason. I am very happy with the profession I chose, and I think I can retire happy with the work I accomplished.

Many people perceive firefighters as heroes due to their ability to save lives, but after all these years, I have come to understand that our strength lies in our ability to work as a cohesive team. Among all the missions I have done, few would have succeeded if not for my fellows and sometimes random citizens of all ages and conditions. It is important to see and talk about the capacity of human beings to empathize and engage with other people when in a catastrophe or danger.

I remember, with a twisted heart, the 2023 earthquake in Turkey and Syria, where hundreds of firefighters from all over the world volunteered to help with rescues. We cannot forget what we have seen there: thousands of dead or missing people trapped in ruins and hundreds of thousands who lost their homes. In such situations, where nature reminds us how its force can crush us, you feel so weak that it is easy to fall into despair. However, saving one person's life makes you feel it is all worth it.

I won't ever forget the day when, walking back to the base camp to rest a little after 15 hours without stopping, I passed through another destroyed place where we had already checked for any sign of life. Still, some people remained, as they could not settle with the idea of leaving this place that was once their home and crying over their lost ones among concrete, glass, and dust. In a blank silence only disturbed by tears, I saw in the distance a group that, turbulent and unsettled, agitated around a little house that was destroyed. I was a bit numb because of the tiredness when I understood this group tried to draw my attention by waving at me.

Not knowing where my strength came from, I changed course and headed toward that group of people who were shouting at me in Turkish, gesticulating, and crying.



When I got close enough, I realized they were children, a teenager, and an elderly woman. Amidst the chaos, I was able to decipher that they had heard something from beneath the rubble of that small house, many hours after the earthquake had destroyed much of the city and claimed thousands of lives.

They had tried, unsuccessfully, to lift a large beam that was falling on a practically destroyed door, where someone could be heard moaning faintly underneath. With gestures that seemed comical to me in that terrible situation, they mimed strongmen, touching my biceps and pointing at the beam for me to lift it. At the first attempt to move it, I realized it was impossible for one person, so we all tried to move it together. We managed to move it a few centimetres but not lift it.

Desperation was growing, the moans growing fainter and more spaced out. Whoever it was losing what little strength they had left after two days under the rubble, without water or food, and with very little air. I was exhausted, struggling to think, but I felt, in the eyes of that group of people, that I was their last hope. I took out my phone to use the translator and try to communicate and convey some comfort, but the battery was dead.

I looked around, observing the devastated landscape and trying to get my head around it. There had to be something to help me get some leverage, but I couldn't see anything with the naked eye. I felt exhausted, and a feeling of defeat began to take hold. I dug my hands into my pockets and touched a piece of paper and the remains of a pencil, and automatically, I got to work.

I took out the paper and pencil and, with a completely unexpected skill, drew the diagram that explained the method we needed to raise the beam. We needed a long, very strong iron bar, that's all. Seeing the drawing and understanding it, they quickly spoke among themselves and organized themselves into pairs, searching for the coveted bar. The old woman stayed next to the weak voice under the house, speaking to her in a reassuring voice. Another girl and I cleared the area and thought about how to place the iron piece and where to push the lever.



Suddenly, we heard screams not so far, which I understood as “Quick, quick, come here!” All of us ran, except the grandma, who stayed with the weak voice that mourned. A seven-year-old kid, with the biggest smile on his face (might have been the first one for days), showed us a big bar of iron under some debris; they were small enough for us to get rid of them quickly and divided ourselves around the piece so we could lift it.

We went back to the old woman and to the voice that would not speak anymore. On the woman’s cheek, a tear rolled down, but she smiled at us. It reminded us that the clock was ticking, and quickly, the young, improvised firefighting team and I planned and executed our plan. Some would put the lever under pressure; the strongest would help move the beam away once lifted, while others remained near the woman to rush with a blanket and water for the trapped one once freed.

And we did it. We did it. Even now, I enjoy remembering how we succeeded. It convinced me that hope and teamwork give supernatural strength. Under the door, a three-year-old girl looked at us with round, surprised eyes just before fainting. Maybe it happened because of the sudden light, or because of the happy screams from the team, or because of the hunger and thirstiness, or because of her extreme tiredness. It struck us at first, but we quickly reasserted her situation and supposed it might be temporary.

The child was, in fact, miraculously unharmed. We gave her water, and bit after bit, she gained back consciousness. After, we offered her a bit of fig bread that I had, and with much struggle, she chewed a bit of it. She needed time and patience. Every one of us celebrated joyfully the success of this mission. Seeing so much happiness after so much despair moved me as much as my first mission.

Then I saw the old woman standing a little apart, crying and smiling silently with the girl in her arms, looking at us. Later, I learned that this girl was her granddaughter, the only survivor of her entire family.

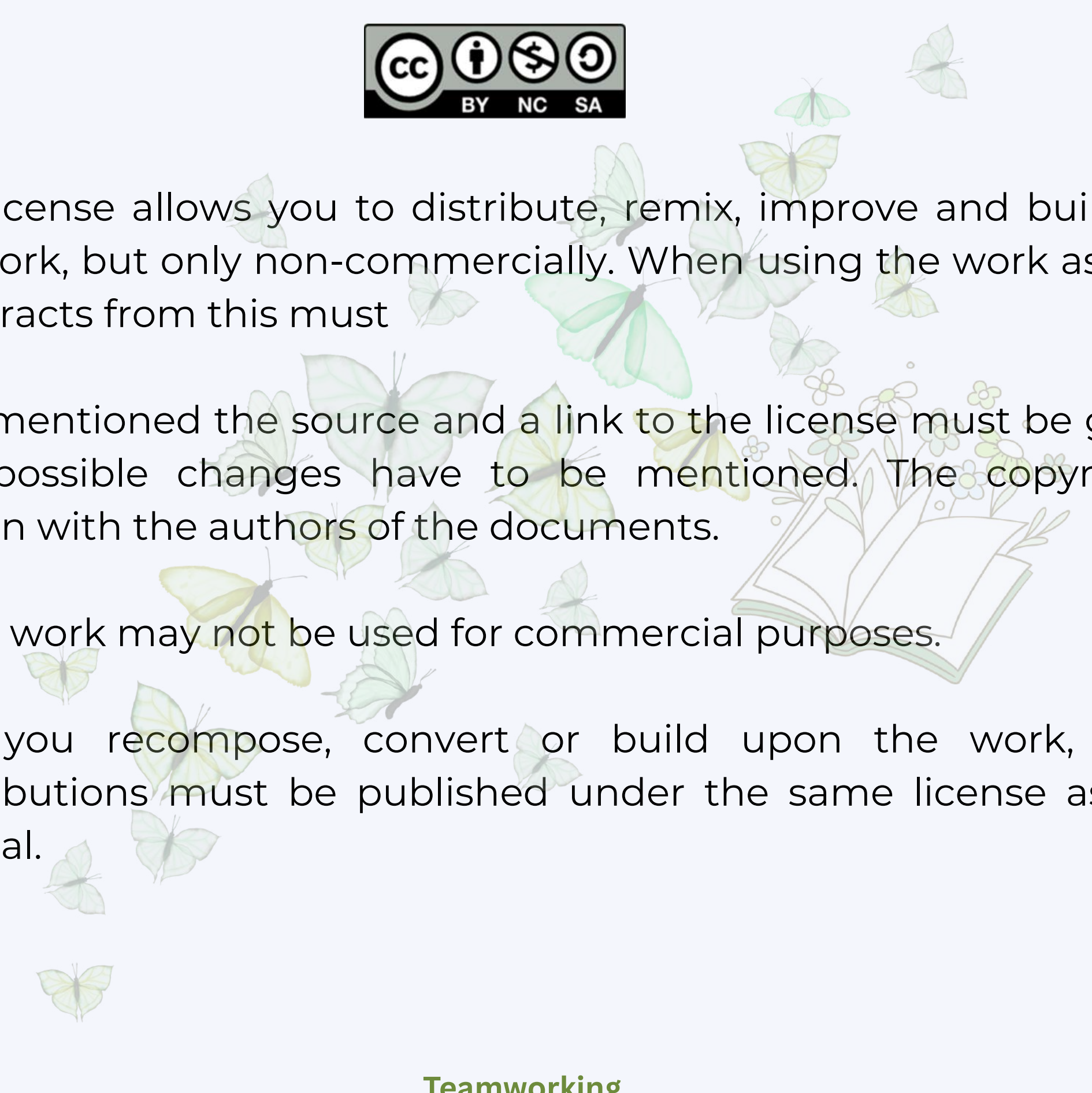


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