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I've come across in many years." —Bill McKibben



A PARADISE BUILT IN HELL

THE EXTRAORDINARY COMMUNITIES
THAT ARISE IN DISASTER



REBECCA SOLNIT

author of *Orwell's Roses*

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A
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BUILT
IN
HELL

The Extraordinary
Communities That Arise
in Disaster

REBECCA SOLNIT

VIKING

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PRELUDE: FALLING TOGETHER

Who are you? Who are we? In times of crisis, these are life-and-death questions. Thousands of people survived Hurricane Katrina because grandsons or aunts or neighbors or complete strangers reached out to those in need all through the Gulf Coast and because an armada of boat owners from the surrounding communities and as far away as Texas went into New Orleans to pull stranded people to safety. Hundreds of people died in the aftermath of Katrina because others, including police, vigilantes, high government officials, and the media, decided that the people of New Orleans were too dangerous to allow them to evacuate the septic, drowned city or to rescue them, even from hospitals. Some who attempted to flee were turned back at gunpoint or shot down. Rumors proliferated about mass rapes, mass murders, and mayhem that turned out later to be untrue, though the national media and New Orleans's police chief believed and perpetuated those rumors during the crucial days when people were dying on rooftops and elevated highways and in crowded shelters and hospitals in the unbearable heat, without adequate water, without food, without medicine and medical attention. Those rumors led soldiers and others dispatched as rescuers to regard victims as enemies. Beliefs matter—though as many people act generously despite their beliefs as the reverse.

Katrina was an extreme version of what goes on in many disasters, wherein how you behave depends on whether you think your neighbors or fellow citizens are a greater threat than the havoc wrought by a disaster or a greater good than the property in houses and stores around you. (*Citizen*, in this book, means members of a city or community, not people in possession of legal citizenship in a nation.) What you believe shapes how you act. How you act results in life or death, for yourself or others, as in everyday life, only

more so. Katrina was, like most disasters, also marked by altruism: of young men who took it upon themselves to supply water, food, diapers, and protection to the strangers stranded with them; of people who rescued or sheltered neighbors; of the uncounted hundreds or thousands who set out in boats—armed, often, but also armed with compassion—to find those who were stranded in the stagnant waters and bring them to safety; of the two hundred thousand or more who (via the Internet site HurricaneHousing.org in the weeks after) volunteered to house complete strangers, mostly in their own homes, persuaded more by the pictures of suffering than the rumors of monstrosity; of the uncounted tens of thousands of volunteers who came to the Gulf Coast to rebuild and restore.

In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human being in times of disaster has little truth to it. Decades of meticulous sociological research on behavior in disasters, from the bombings of World War II to floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, and storms across the continent and around the world, have demonstrated this. But belief lags behind, and often the worst behavior in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against barbarism. From earthquake-shattered San Francisco in 1906 to flooded New Orleans in 2005, innocents have been killed by people who believed or asserted that their victims were the criminals and they themselves were the protectors of the shaken order. Beliefs matter.

“Today Cain is still killing his brother” proclaims a faded church mural in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, which was so devastated by the failure of the government levees. In quick succession, the Book of Genesis gives us the creation of the universe, the illicit acquisition of knowledge, the expulsion from Paradise, and the slaying of Abel by Cain, a second fall from

grace into jealousy, competition, alienation, and violence. When God asks Cain where his brother is, Cain asks back, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He is refusing to say what God already knows: that the spilled blood of Abel cries out from the ground that has absorbed it. He is also raising one of the perennial social questions: are we beholden to each other, must we take care of each other, or is it every man for himself ?

Most traditional societies have deeply entrenched commitments and connections between individuals, families, and groups. The very concept of society rests on the idea of networks of affinity and affection, and the freestanding individual exists largely as an outcast or exile. Mobile and individualistic modern societies shed some of these old ties and vacillate about taking on others, especially those expressed through economic arrangements—including provisions for the aged and vulnerable, the mitigation of poverty and desperation—the keeping of one’s brothers and sisters. The argument against such keeping is often framed as an argument about human nature: we are essentially selfish, and because you will not care for me, I cannot care for you. I will not feed you because I must hoard against starvation, since I too cannot count on others. Better yet, I will take your wealth and add it to mine—if I believe that my well-being is independent of yours or pitted against yours—and justify my conduct as natural law. If I am not my brother’s keeper, then we have been expelled from paradise, a paradise of unbroken solidarities.

Thus does everyday life become a social disaster. Sometimes disaster intensifies this; sometimes it provides a remarkable reprieve from it, a view into another world for our other selves. When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up—not all, but the great preponderance—to become their brothers’ keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amid death, chaos, fear, and loss. Were we to know and believe this, our sense of what is possible at any time might change. We speak of self-fulfilling prophecies, but any belief that is acted on

makes the world in its image. Beliefs matter. And so do the facts behind them. The astonishing gap between common beliefs and actualities about disaster behavior limits the possibilities, and changing beliefs could fundamentally change much more. Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper.

I landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, shortly after a big hurricane tore up the city in October of 2003. The man in charge of taking me around told me about the hurricane—not about the winds that roared at more than a hundred miles an hour and tore up trees, roofs, and telephone poles or about the seas that rose nearly ten feet, but about the neighbors. He spoke of the few days when everything was disrupted, and he lit up with happiness as he did so. In his neighborhood all the people had come out of their houses to speak with each other, aid each other, improvise a community kitchen, make sure the elders were okay, and spend time together, no longer strangers. “Everybody woke up the next morning and everything was different,” he mused. “There was no electricity, all the stores were closed, no one had access to media. The consequence was that everyone poured out into the street to bear witness. Not quite a street party, but everyone out at once—it was a sense of happiness to see everybody even though we didn't know each other.” His joy struck me powerfully.

A friend told me of being trapped in a terrible fog, one of the dense tule fogs that overtakes California's Central Valley periodically. On this occasion the fog mixed with dust from the cotton fields created a shroud so perilous that the highway patrol stopped all traffic on the highway. For two days she was stranded with many others in a small diner. She and her husband slept upright, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, in the banquettes of the diner's booths. Although food and water began to run short, they had a marvelous time. The people gathered there had little in common, but they all opened up, began to tell each other the stories of their lives, and by the time the road

was safe, my friend and her husband were reluctant to leave. But they went onward, home to New Mexico for the holidays, where everyone looked at them perplexedly as they told the story of their stranding with such ebullience. That time in the diner was the first time ever her partner, a Native American, had felt a sense of belonging in society at large. Such redemption amid disruption is common.

It reminded me of how many of us in the San Francisco Bay Area had loved the Loma Prieta earthquake that took place three weeks before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Or loved not the earthquake but the way communities had responded to it. It was alarming for most of us as well, devastating for some, and fatal for sixty people (a very low death count for a major earthquake in an area inhabited by millions). When the subject of the quake came up with a new acquaintance, she too glowed with recollection about how her San Francisco neighborhood had, during the days the power was off, cooked up all its thawing frozen food and held barbecues on the street; how gregarious everyone had been, how people from all walks of life had mixed in candlelit bars that became community centers. Another friend recently remembered with unextinguished amazement that when he traveled the several miles from the World Series baseball game at Candlestick Park in the city's southeast to his home in the central city, someone was at every blacked-out intersection, directing traffic. Without orders or centralized organization, people had stepped up to meet the needs of the moment, suddenly in charge of their communities and streets.

When that earthquake shook the central California coast on October 17, 1989, I was surprised to find that the person I was angry at no longer mattered. The anger had evaporated along with everything else abstract and remote, and I was thrown into an intensely absorbing present. I was more surprised to realize that most of the people I knew and met in the Bay Area were also enjoying immensely the disaster that shut down much of the region for several days, the Bay Bridge for months, and certain unloved

elevated freeways forever—if *enjoyment* is the right word for that sense of immersion in the moment and solidarity with others caused by the rupture in everyday life, an emotion graver than happiness but deeply positive. We don't even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear. We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological.

For weeks after the big earthquake of 1989, friendship and love counted for a lot, long-term plans and old anxieties for very little. Life was situated in the here and now, and many inessentials had been pared away. The earthquake was unnerving, as were the aftershocks that continued for months. Most of us were at least a little on edge, but many of us were enriched rather than impoverished, overall, at least emotionally. A more somber version of that strange pleasure in disaster emerged after September 11, 2001, when many Americans seemed stirred, moved, and motivated by the newfound sense of urgency, purpose, solidarity, and danger they had encountered. They abhorred what had happened, but they clearly relished who they briefly became.

What is this feeling that crops up during so many disasters? After the Loma Prieta quake, I began to wonder about it. After 9/11, I began to see how strange a phenomenon it was and how deeply it mattered. After I met the man in Halifax who lit up with joy when he talked about the great hurricane there, I began to study it. After I began to write about the 1906 earthquake as its centennial approached, I started to see how often this peculiar feeling arose and how much it remade the world of disaster. After Hurricane Katrina tore up the Gulf Coast, I began to understand the limits and possibilities of disasters. This book is about that emotion, as important as it is surprising, and the circumstances that arouse it and those that it generates. These things count as we enter an era of increasing and intensifying disaster. And more than that, they matter as we enter an era

when questions about everyday social possibilities and human nature arise again, as they often have in turbulent times.

When I ask people about the disasters they have lived through, I find on many faces that retrospective basking as they recount tales of Canadian ice storms, midwestern snow days, New York City blackouts, oppressive heat in southern India, fire in New Mexico, the great earthquake in Mexico City, earlier hurricanes in Louisiana, the economic collapse in Argentina, earthquakes in California and Mexico, and a strange pleasure overall. It was the joy on their faces that surprised me. And with those whom I read rather than spoke to, it was the joy in their words that surprised me. It should not be so, is not so, in the familiar version of what disaster brings, and yet it is there, arising from rubble, from ice, from fire, from storms and floods. The joy matters as a measure of otherwise neglected desires, desires for public life and civil society, for inclusion, purpose, and power.

Disasters are, most basically, terrible, tragic, grievous, and no matter what positive side effects and possibilities they produce, they are not to be desired. But by the same measure, those side effects should not be ignored because they arise amid devastation. The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful they shine even from wreckage, carnage, and ashes. What happens here is relevant elsewhere. And the point is not to welcome disasters. They do not create these gifts, but they are one avenue through which the gifts arrive. Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what manifests there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times and in other extraordinary times.

Most social change is chosen—you want to belong to a co-op, you believe in social safety nets or community-supported agriculture. But disaster doesn't sort us out by preferences; it drags us into emergencies that require we act, and act altruistically, bravely, and with initiative in order to survive or save the neighbors, no matter how we vote or what we do for a living. The