Better Than We Think
A sermon by Steven Epperson
January 3, 2010
Unitarian Church of Vancouver

Before the detonation of nuclear weapons, the explosion of the munitions ship the *Mont Blanc* in the Halifax harbour on the morning of December 6, 1917, was the greatest man-made blast in human history. Three thousand tons of explosives on the *Mont Blanc* detonated after a collision with another ship, hurling the *Mont Blanc's* six million pound hulk over a thousand feet in the air. A fireball from the blast destroyed every building within a mile radius. Shock waves knocked down buildings and snapped trees and telegraph poles like twigs. A cloud of white smoke lofted twenty thousand feet into the skies. More than 1500 people were killed, 9000 injured; families were torn apart, leaving widows, widowers, orphans, and devastated parents.

It was a catastrophe of epic proportions rivaling natural disasters like the earthquake that struck San Francisco in 1906 and the breaking of the levees by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans four years ago. Disasters like these events, and we could cite them—man-made and acts of nature by the hundreds, these cataclysms entailing loss of human life, destruction of property, long-term hardship—by any reckoning they are terrible, tragic and grievous.

In the year of my birth, at the height of the Cold War fifty-five years ago, William Golding's allegorical novel, *Lord of the Flies*, was first published. A group of school boys survive a plane crash and are left stranded without adult supervision on a remote, uninhabited island. We know what happens next: within a brief span of time, this band of uniformed, civilized kids descend into a hell of tribalism, hysteria, and murder. Golding speculates that if a disaster, like a plane crash marooning a pack of kids, were to occur—wiping out the constraints of conventional roles, order and authority, then just about everything we know and value about civilization would go down the tubes.

The *Lord of the Flies* is a work of imaginative fiction read by millions of secondary students every year. The devastating explosion of the *Mont Blanc* in Halifax harbour was an historical event that took place within my mother's lifetime. What happened in the wake of that non-fictional catastrophe? How did people react to the destruction and chaos of the blast? One Dartmouth journalist at the time claimed that looters ran amok in the ruins in Halifax and that "ghouls" plundered the dead. A book on the Halifax explosion, written in 1962, asserted that almost immediately after the explosion “the elements of civilized society were broken down and for many all that remained was the jungle law of self-preservation.” (cited in Solnit, 89)

Sounds very much like a *Lord of the Flies* scenario, doesn’t it? It coincides with the shocking reports of mayhem, looting, and murder unleashed by gangs of young thugs and citizens unfettered by law and order in New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Far away in New York City, Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* summed up the hastily drawn popular media viewpoint that “The Big Easy” had been dropped to its knees; New Orleans, she wrote on September 3, 2005, was a “snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping…[and of] suffering innocents..” Even further away, Timothy Garton Ash, writing from Great Britain, waxed philosophical: “Katrina’s big lesson is that the crust of civilization on which we tread is always wafer thin. One tremor, and you’ve fallen through, scratching and gouging for your life like a wild dog. Remove the elementary staples of organised, civilised life—food, shelter, drinkable water, minimal personal security—and we go back within hours to a…state of nature, a war of all against all.” (cited in Solnit, 241-2)

Thankfully, on closer inspection, *in fact*, these dire accounts and arm chair philosophizing are wrong. In Halifax, “the chief of police reported on December 9, three days after the explosion, that he had heard of only one case of attempted burglary.” Laura MacDonald, a Halifax resident, wrote that her city, “with its [normally] rigid class structure—divided by religion, class, and country—briefly [and blessedly] integrated. English Protestant mothers, who two days before would not have stepped foot in [the] Richmond [neighbourhood] suddenly welcomed poor Irish Catholic children into their homes. Whole families were invited to live in the parlors of wealthier citizens.” And she wrote that “teenagers and young adults… proved particularly useful. They took instruction [and] worked for hours on end without sleep…” (Solnit, 78)

As well, there are the moving reports of individual sacrifice that saved the lives of hundreds: Vincent Coleman, a railroad dispatcher, on seeing the *Mont Blanc* set ablaze by the collision “rushed back into the telegraph office near the harbor despite the mortal danger to send a warning and a farewell up the tracks: ‘Hold up the train [approaching the city]. Ammunition ship on fire making for Pier 6 and will explode. Guess this will be my last message. Goodbye boys.’” Nineteen year old Harold Floyd stayed behind to telephone safety information and died as well. Jean Groves, a telephone operator at the exchange building near the dock, stayed behind in the shattered site to call for nurses, doctors and firemen. Grievously injured, she had to be carried from the building. (Solnit, 76-77)

Untold scores of medical teams, hundreds of skilled labourers and volunteers stepped forward and worked round the clock to address the emergency needs of the injured, orphaned and homeless. Immediately after the blast, Joe Glube abandoned the work of boarding up his stationary store and joined up with volunteers who had opened up grocery warehouses without permission to distribute their contents to a desperately needy city. Over in Halifax's St. Paul Anglican Church, the hall became a refuge for 350 homeless families and served over ten thousand meals in the first month after the blast—one of many churches that became emergency shelters. These kinds of acts, sacrifices, improvisations—calling for new roles, new alliances and new rules—are typical of disasters. One local authority, surveying the spontaneous response by residents all over the ravaged city, spoke to the effect that "sad as was the day, it may be the greatest day in the city's history." (Solnit, 78, 80)

Now fast forward and travel south with me to New Orleans post-Katrina, and look closely. The CNN television script written from a distance in the wake of the hurricane, read like this: all hell had broken loose in New Orleans. "On the dark streets, rampaging gangs take full advantage of the unguarded city. Anyone venturing outside is in danger of being robbed or even shot. It is a state of siege." (cited in McKibben, "In the Face of Catastrophe: A Surprise, *New York Review of Books,* November 5, 2009, p. 51)

Again, most of this was completely untrue; and "over the weeks following Katrina, news organizations quietly retracted" one unverified report after another. Instead of hundreds of corpses, looting and rape in and around the convention centre wildly described on national TV news—six deaths by natural causes and a suicide. And no sexual assaults.

There was some looting in the city to be sure; much of it, though, was similar to what took place in Halifax when citizens opened up the food warehouses. It's called "requisitioning" in an emergency when the authorities can't, or won't, respond quickly enough to dire need. In New Orleans, young black men described as looters by the mayor and the media, *in fact* organized themselves at the convention centre "to go get diapers and juice from abandoned stores." One policeman on the scene called them "Good Samaritans." They "got together as a group and disseminated it [water, diapers, juice and food] amongst [the people] without any riots, any fights, anything." (McKibben, 51)

Good Samaritans or ghoulish thieves? *Lord of Flies* or ad hoc, citizens' emergency Salvation Armies—which one is it to be? When disaster strikes, in the form of a hurricane or a munitions explosion, is it the case—assumed or predicted by so many that we *must be reduced* to a so-called "state of nature, a war of all against all"; or do we, will we, in extreme cases, *cooperate* instead? Rather than resorting to "fight or flight" in extremity, do we, perhaps to our own astonishment, "tend and befriend"? And if so, does this have anything to say about us, about human nature?

Such is the task, these are some of the questions, raised in a recently published, extraordinary book that I read over the holidays called: *A Paradise Built in Hell: the Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* written by Rebecca Solnit. Solnit is an independent writer and journalist with books and essays ranging from the topography of San Francisco to a history of walking. In this book, she does not attempt to cover every kind of disaster. For example, she does not write about the kind of tragedies that dissolve human bonds—the Holocaust in Europe, the slaughter in Darfur, the looting in Baghdad—that grew out of or produced the opposite of human solidarity. Instead, she focuses her attention on "a distinct class of events" that we imagine, or that we expect *should* result in chaos and selfish violence.

And what she has discovered, from the 9/11 attacks to earthquakes in Nicaragua and Mexico City, from the Halifax disaster to the post Katrina New Orleans, is that these events—though "terrible, tragic and grievous"—also give rise to "remarkable temporary communities—paradises of a sort in the rubble, where people, acting on their own and without direction from the authorities, manage to provide for each other." (McKibben, 50) "In the wake of an earthquake," she writes, "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 societies that take shape in the days and weeks after these events are like a utopia for many people, where concrete acts for the public good trump the slovenly rhetoric and expectations that just *assume* that when ordinary people are left to their own devices, we will revert to each-against-all behaviour and selfish, private self-interest.

Public good. A kind of temporary utopia. I have seen this in the wake of blizzards that temporarily shut down cities and access to everyday amenities: once in Providence, Rhode Island, thirty years ago and then last year, here in Vancouver. Hotels opened up their doors to house the homeless. Commuters, strangers to each other stranded at bus stops shared stories and taxi cabs.

Neighbours shovelled each other's sidewalks and looked in to see if shut-ins were doing OK. For a few brief, blessed days or weeks, we became aware of each other and of the power of nature; and we felt a kind of lightness and joy.

In April 1906, the San Francisco earthquake left a devastated city in its aftermath. Those who survived, however, as in Halifax, fought the fires, protected each other, and set up remarkably resilient, sturdy societies in parks, churches and vacant lots. First-hand accounts, Solnit reports, reveal that "the people were for the most part calm and cheerful, and many survived the quake with gratitude and generosity." "She recounts one story after another of ordinary people who set up soup kitchens that served hundreds daily, of five hundred union plumbers in San Francisco who volunteered without pay and worked around the clock 'for over a week repairing broken pipes and stopping waste of water in the unburned district,' of groceries and slaughterhouses that gave away every bit of their stock to anyone who asked." (McKibben, 50)

Her account of the widespread, spontaneous behaviour of New Yorkers during and immediately after the 9/11 attacks is so heartbreaking and beautiful that I sat there weeping onto the pages of the book laid out in front of me. I was reminded of the words of the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould who witnessed these acts of human solidarity, and called it the "Great Asymmetry." For every incident of spectacular evil (or disaster), we can, we must, bring forward 10,000 acts of kindness to bear witness; acts too quiet, too decent and ordinary to be reckoned in the annals of peoples and empires. The ecologist Craig Packer, writing in September 2001, said "there's a grandness in the human species"; and the anthropologist James Moore marveled: "We're the nicest species I know. To see [all those people] risking their lives, climbing over the rubble on the chance of finding one person alive, well you wouldn't find baboons doing that. Horrors notwithstanding, the overall picture to come out about human nature is wonderful."

Solnit calls these temporary solidarities "disaster communities"; remarkable societies whose appearance over and again, *"suggest that, just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful, and imaginative after a disaster, that we revert to something we already know how to do. The possibility of paradise," she concludes, "is already within us as a default setting."* (cited in McKibben, 50)

This isn't wooly, touchy feely, wishful thinking. These are some of the conclusions that arise from a whole field of research called "disaster studies" (I didn't know about them either) that started up during the Cold War, and pioneered by Charles Fritz at the University of Chicago and Enrico Quarantelli of the Institute for Defense Analysis. Based on methodical investigation of dozens of disasters, they started, first, with a description of conventional beliefs and assumptions by political, media, military and academic elites about how ordinary people were *supposed* to behave in extreme situations of war and natural disaster: mass panic, wild stampedes, loss of concern for their fellows, hysteria, and exploitative behavior; that's then followed by a widespread sense of stunned helplessness which renders victims of disaster completely dependent on outside aid for guidance and organization. (Sonit, 104-107)

Fifty years later, I might add, these are exactly the conventional beliefs Naomi Klein displays in her book *Shock Doctrine,* where she asserts the aftermath of disasters are opportunities for conquest from above; of disasters as creating "malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored…[and] profound[ly] disoriented….[W]e no longer know who or where we are. We become like children, we look for daddies." It's a surprisingly dispiriting, disempowering portrait; a view that Charles Fritz and those social scientists who study disasters have utterly refuted based on decades now of research and hundreds of case studies. (Solnit, 107)

What these studies, and Rebecca Solnit's timely book, reveal about us—I find provocatively redemptive and encouraging as we begin a new year. It begins with a radical premise, and that is: "everyday life is already a disaster of sorts, one from which actual disaster liberates us." We suffer from recurrent stress and anxieties in everyday life and die daily, though in ordinary times, we do it privately and separately; and here, all-too-often, modern societies fail to fulfill basic human needs from community identity and personal meaning. (Solnit, 107)

The second finding goes like this: "the widespread sharing of danger, loss, and deprivation produces an intimate, primary group solidarity among the survivors, which overcomes social isolation, provides a channel for intimate communication and expression, and provides a major source of physical and emotional support and reassurance." In these settings, the 'outsider' becomes an 'insider,' the 'marginal,' 'central'; "people are thus able to perceive, with a clarity never before possible, a set of underlying basic values to which all people subscribe. They realize that collective action is necessary for these values to be maintained." And through this action and the values they disclosed, people feel a sense of "belonging" and "unity rarely achieved under normal circumstances." (Solnit, 108)

That is to say, disasters may be a physical hell, but for those who survive them what arises, what we rediscover in us are deep wells of benevolence, sympathy and solidarity waiting to be tapped and channeled into service. "Teenagers and young adults," in the words of Halifax survivor Laura MacDonald, "proved particularly useful. They took instruction [and] worked for hours on end without sleep…" They become "Good Samaritans," the New Orleans policeman observed. They're given something immediately useful and meaningful to do. Provided with temporary liberation from the web of old griefs, habits, assumptions and fears in which we are normally caught, these events, and the altruism they evoke, tell us that we may *just* be better than we think.

Don't assume for a moment, however, that I am not aware of our dark side; I have studied and been oppressed by it all my life. *And yet, and yet*…we must never forget the ***Great Asymmetry*** that is the deepest truth about the human family. For every incident of evil (or disaster) there are and always have been 10,000 acts of decent, ordinary, saving, meaning bestowing kindness and solidarity expressed by women, men and children every day. Remembering, reclaiming, and living out this truth as our birthright, experiencing the sense of purpose and closeness that it brings, and doing it without the outside pressure of crisis and disaster, may well be "the great contemporary task of being human." May we take this up as our spiritual practice—look evil in the eye, know in our bones that it is there—*and then* let us respond defiantly, with grace and generosity, to strengthen and bless the deep ties, the connectedness we all have from loved ones, to the congregation of the faithful, to all beings everywhere.

© 2010 Unitarian Church of Vancouver