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.
(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 monstrousity; 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
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 situatated 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
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 arise 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 positive emotions that arise in those unpromising circumstances demonstrate that social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding. The very structure of our economy and society prevents these goals from being achieved. The structure is also ideological, a philosophy that best serves the wealthy and powerful but shapes all of our lives, reinforced as the conventional wisdom disseminated by the media, from news hours to disaster movies. The facets of that ideology have been called individualism, capitalism, and Social Darwinism and have appeared in the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Malibu, as well as the work of most conventional contemporary economists, who presume we seek personal gain for rational reasons and refrain from looking at the ways a system skewed to that end damages much else we need for our survival and desire for our well-being. Disaster demonstrates this, since among the factors determining whether you will live or die are the health of your immediate community and the justness of your society. We need ties, but they along with purposefulness, immediacy, and agency also give us joy—the startling, sharp joy I found in accounts of disaster survivors. These accounts demonstrate that the citizens any paradise would need—the people who are brave enough, resourceful enough, and generous enough—already exist. The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise now arises in hell, it’s because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way.

This book investigates five disasters in depth, from the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco to the hurricane and flood in New Orleans ninety-nine years later. In between come the Halifax explosion of 1917, the extraordinary Mexico City earthquake that killed so many and changed so much, and the neglected tales of how ordinary New Yorkers responded to the calamity that struck their city on September 11, 2001. In and around these principal examples come stories of the London Blitz; of earthquakes in China and Argentina; of the Chernobyl nuclear accident; the Chicago heat wave of 1995; the Managua, Nicaragua, earthquake that helped topple
a regime; a smallpox epidemic in New York; and a volcanic eruption in Iceland. Though the worst natural disasters in recent years have been in Asia—the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the 2008 earthquake in China and typhoon in Burma—I have not written about them. They matter immensely, but language and distance as well as culture kept these disasters out of reach for me.

Since postmodernity reshaped the intellectual landscape, it has been problematic to even use the term human nature, with its implication of a stable and universal human essence. The study of disasters makes it clear that there are plural and contingent natures—but the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic, and brave. The language of therapy speaks almost exclusively of the consequence of disaster as trauma, suggesting a humanity that is unbearably fragile, a self that does not act but is acted upon, the most basic recipe of the victim. Disaster movies and the media continue to portray ordinary people as hysterical or vicious in the face of calamity. We believe these sources telling us we are victims or brutes more than we trust our own experience. Most people know this other human nature from experience, though almost nothing official or mainstream confirms it. This book is an account of that rising from the ruins that is the ordinary human response to disaster and of what that rising can mean in other arenas—a subject that slips between the languages we have been given to talk about who we are when everything goes wrong.

But to understand both that rising and what hinders and hides it, there are two other important subjects to consider. One is the behavior of the minority in power, who often act savagely in a disaster. The other is the beliefs and representations of the media, the people who hold up a distorting mirror to us in which it is almost impossible to recognize these paradises and our possibilities. Beliefs matter, and the overlapping beliefs of the media and the elites can become a second wave of disaster—as they did most dramatically in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These three subjects are woven together in almost every disaster, and finding the one that matters most—this glimpse of paradise—means understanding the marketing and media shape imagination more and more toward private life and private satisfaction, as citizens are redefined as consumers, as public participation falters and with it any sense of collective or individual political power, as even the language for public emotions and satisfactions withers. There is no money in what is aptly called free association: we are instead encouraged by media and advertising to fear each other and regard public life as a danger and a nuisance, to live in secured spaces, communicate by electronic means, and acquire our information from media rather than each other. But in disaster people come together, and though some fear this gathering as a mob, many cherish it as an experience of a civil society that is close enough to paradise. In contemporary terms, privatization is largely an economic term, for the consignment of jurisdictions, goods, services, and powers—railways, water rights, policing, education—to the private sector and the vagaries of the marketplace. But this economic privatization is impossible without the privatization of desire and imagination that tells us we are not each other’s keeper. Disasters, in returning their sufferers to public and collective life, undo some of this privatization, which is a slower, subtler disaster all its own. In a society in which participation, agency, purposefulness, and freedom are all adequately present, a disaster would be only a disaster.

Few speak of paradise now, except as something remote enough to be impossible. The ideal societies we hear of are mostly far away or long ago or both, situated in some primordial society before the Fall or a spiritual kingdom in a remote Himalayan vastness. The implication is that we here and now are far from capable of living such ideals. But what if paradise flashed up among us from time to time—at the worst of times? What if we glimpsed it in the jaws of hell? These flashes give us, as the long ago and far away do not, a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become. This is a paradise of rising to the occasion that points out by contrast how the rest of the time most of us fall down from the heights of possibility, down into diminished selves and dismal societies. Many now do not even hope for a better society, but they recognize it when they encounter it, and that discovery shines
The word *emergency* comes from *emerge*, to rise out of, the opposite of merge, which comes from *mergere*, to be within or under a liquid, immersed, submerged. An emergency is a separation from the familiar, a sudden emergence into a new atmosphere, one that often demands we ourselves rise to the occasion. *Catastrophe* comes from the Greek *kata*, or down, and *streiphen*, or turning over. It means an upset of what is expected and was originally used to mean a plot twist. To emerge into the unexpected is not always terrible, though these words have evolved to imply ill fortune. The word *disaster* comes from the Latin compound of *dis-* or away, without, and *astro*, star or planet, literally, without a star. It originally suggested misfortune due to astrologically generated trouble, as in the blues musician Albert King’s classic “Born Under a Bad Sign.”

In some of the disasters of the twentieth century—the big northeastern blackouts in 1965 and 2003, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area, 2005’s Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast—the loss of electrical power meant that the light pollution blotting out the night sky vanished. In these disaster-struck cities, people suddenly found themselves under the canopy of stars still visible in small and remote places. On the warm night of August 15, 2003, the Milky Way could be seen in New York City, a heavenly realm long lost to view until the blackout that hit the Northeast late that afternoon. You can think of the current social order as something akin to this artificial light: another kind of power that fails in disaster. In its place appears a reversion to improvised, collaborative, cooperative, and local society. However beautiful the stars of a suddenly visible night sky, few nowadays could find their way by them. But the constellations of solidarity, altruism, and improvisation are within most of us and reappear at these times. People know what to do in a disaster. The loss of power, the disaster in the modern sense, is an affliction, but the reappearance of these old heavens is its opposite. This is the paradise entered through hell.
he encountered in the first days after the storm that three years later he was planning to leave the country. He feared a pandemic could bring an even worse response. Beyond that, Katrina's effects are still unfolding, in a devastated city and its citizens but also in the hearts of the hundreds of thousands of volunteers and in the new coalitions that arose.

This has been a book about disaster's recent past, but it also has a future, a future where knowledge matters and so do desire and belief.

**EPILOGUE:**

THE DOORWAY IN THE RUINS

Who are you? Who are we? The history of disaster demonstrates that most of us are social animals, hungry for connection, as well as for purpose and meaning. It also suggests that if this is who we are, then everyday life in most places is a disaster that disruptions sometimes give us a chance to change. They are a crack in the walls that ordinarily hem us in, and what floods in can be enormously destructive—or creative. Hierarchies and institutions are inadequate to these circumstances; they are often what fails in such crises. Civil society is what succeeds, not only in an emotional demonstration of altruism and mutual aid but also in a practical mustering of creativity and resources to meet the challenges. Only this dispersed force of countless people making countless decisions is adequate to a major crisis. One reason that disasters are threatening to elites is that power devolves to the people on the ground in many ways: it is the neighbors who are the first responders and who assemble the impromptu kitchens and networks to rebuild. And it demonstrates the viability of a dispersed, decentralized system of decision making. Citizens themselves in these moments constitute the government—the acting decision-making body—as democracy has always promised and rarely delivered. Thus disasters often unfold as though a revolution has already taken place.
desire connection, participation, altruism, and purposefulness. Thus the startling joy in disasters. After the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl survived Auschwitz, he concluded that retaining a sense of meaning and purpose was in many cases decisive in who survived and who did not. After 9/11, New Yorker Marshall Berman cited Nietzsche: “Man, the bravest animal and the one most inclined to trouble, does not deny suffering per se: he wants it, he even seeks it out, provided it can be given a meaning.” Frankl quotes another version of Nietzsche’s pronouncement: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” When Dorothy Day gave up her lover, she gave up an intensely tangible private affection for another, broader love, of God, but also of purposefulness, meaning, involvement, and community, without which she had been miserable even in her ménage. She gave up her how for a why. The joy in disaster comes, when it comes, from that purposefulness, the immersion in service and survival, and from an affection that is not private and personal but civic: the love of strangers for each other, of a citizen for his or her city, of belonging to a greater whole, of doing the work that matters.

These loves remain largely dormant and unacknowledged in contemporary postindustrial society: this is the way in which everyday life is a disaster. For acted upon, given a role, this is a love that builds society, resilience, community, purpose, and meaning. Private life matters immensely, but the language for prizing eros and domesticity has never been stronger, and the language for public life more atrophied, at least in the mass-media mainstream of the English-speaking world. Around the periphery come crowds of ideas about gift communities, direct and participatory democracy, civil society, urban regeneration, beloved community, joy, and solidarity. People have never reached toward these things in more ways, and the many alternatives being tried out across the country from agriculture to decentralized decision-making systems matter, as do the broader examples around the world from Argentine alternatives and Mexican Zapatismo to greening European cities and solidarity networks stretching from India and South Africa to the West. Beliefs matter nowhere more than in the way citizens in many Latin American nations have been able to seize the moment of disaster and make something of it. It is the ability to describe and cherish the other loves that makes disaster’s moments of mutual aid last. You may be able to rejoice in what you cannot name, but you can’t cultivate it.

Disaster may offer us a glimpse, but the challenge is to make something of it, before or beyond disaster: to recognize and realize these desires and these possibilities in ordinary times. If there are ordinary times ahead. We are entering an era where sudden and slow disaster will become far more powerful and far more common. When I began writing this book in 2007, floods were washing through central England and central Texas; fires raged in Greece, Utah, and California; heat waves baked Hungary and parts of the United States while droughts afflicted other regions; and China faced drought, flood, fire, and heat waves all at once. Peru had been hit by a big earthquake, and the devastation of Pakistan’s 2005 earthquake, the Gulf Coast’s Hurricane Katrina, and the Indian Ocean’s 2004 tsunami were far from over. As I rewrote this book a year later, central China was recovering from the huge Sichuan earthquake of May 12 that killed at least seventy thousand and left millions homeless; Burma’s coastal regions had been devastation by a typhoon (and its people more so by a dictatorship that thwarted most attempts at aid); England and the upper Mississippi had flooded again; Benin, Togo, Ethiopia, Niger, and many other African countries had also flooded, as had the state of Tabasco in Mexico. Madagascar was hit by three cyclones; California had burned again on an epic scale; New Orleans had been sorely tested by another hurricane that had also destroyed or damaged ninety thousand homes in Cuba; people were stranded on their roofs after a hurricane that brought on floods and hundreds of deaths in Haiti and displaced or stranded millions in Texas; and more hurricanes were brewing in an unprecedentedly volatile year of hot storms in the Gulf of Mexico, including another that reached coastal Canada, where my inquiry had begun five years earlier in the wake of Hurricane Juan.

In late 2007 the humanitarian organization Oxfam reported, “Climatic disasters are increasing as temperatures climb and rainfall intensifies. A rise in small- and medium-scale disasters is a particularly worrying trend.” Yet extreme weather need not bring disasters; it is poverty and powerlessness that make people vulnerable. Though more emergency aid is needed, humanitarian response must do more than save lives: it has to link to climate change adaptation and bolster poor people’s livelihoods through social protection and disaster risk reduction approaches.” In speaking of poverty, Oxfam calls for material change, but powerlessness implies more subtle social conditions. What we know about the history
of disaster and the plethora of disasters coming calls for obvious infrastructure and systemic changes and specific disaster preparedness. But it also calls for more metaphysical changes—first, to acknowledge how people respond in disasters and to reduce the institutional fear and hostility to the public, then to prepare to incorporate what the disaster scholars call “prosocial” behavior into disaster planning.

The current global economic depression is itself a vast disaster. Grim though it is, it may also be a chance for decentralization, democratization, civic engagement, and emergent organizations and ways of coping—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it may demand these things as means of survival. The more profound preparation for disaster must make a society more like that of disaster utopias in their brief flowering: more flexible and improvisational, more egalitarian and less hierarchical, with more room for meaningful roles and contributions from all members—and with a sense of membership. Civil society is what saves people and creates the immediate conditions for survival—rescue teams, field kitchens, concerned neighbors—and it is a preventative too, as the Chicago heat wave, Cuban hurricanes, and many other disasters have demonstrated.

Already, climate change is shaping up to be as unfair as disasters have ever been, impacting the vulnerable of the tropics, highlands, far north, and coasts while those most responsible for creating the turbulent anthropocene (or human-made) climate era stall on measures to limit and mitigate its effects. It too is a democracy question, about who benefits, who loses, who should decide, and who does. Surviving and maybe even turning back the tide of this pervasive ongoing disaster will require more ability to improvise together, stronger societies, more confidence in each other. It will require a world in which we are each other’s wealth and have each other’s trust. This world can be made possible only by the faith in social possibility that understanding ourselves in past disaster can give us and by the embeddedness in place and society that constitutes a sense of belonging.

When I began to discover the remarkable findings and conclusions of the disaster sociologists, particularly the profoundly positive views of Charles Fritz, they seemed to confirm a sunny view of human nature. But not everyone behaves well. Elite panic in disaster, as identified by the contemporary disaster scholars, is shaped by belief, belief that since human beings at large are bestial and dangerous, the believer must himself or herself act with savagery to ensure individual safety or the safety of his or her interests. The elites that panic are, in times of crisis, the minority, and understanding that could marginalize or even disarm them, literally and psychologically, as well as the media that magnify their message. This would help open the way to create a world more like the brief utopias that flash up in disaster.

At the end of 2008, a report by the U.S. Army War College proposed that the economic crisis could lead to civil unrest requiring military intervention. Treasury secretary Henry Paulson had himself suggested martial law might be required, and the Phoenix police were themselves preparing to suppress civil unrest, including that provoked by the economic downturn. Even as the Bush administration was fading from the scene, those in power continued to regard the public as the enemy.

Relieving those in charge of their entrenched beliefs will not be easy. Lee Clarke, the coauthor of the definitive essay on elite panic, told me that after 9/11 he found himself at a lot of conferences sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security and by FEMA. There he tried to tell the bureaucrats what actually works in disasters. "In a chaotic situation command and control is bound to fail," he'd say of the top-down management system many organizations deploy in crisis. He told the disaster administrators who wanted to know what message to give people in disaster that it is the people who might have some messages to give them on what's actually going on and what's actually needed. Clarke concluded, "They don't have a way to fold civil society into their official conceptions."

Federal bureaucrats under Bush weren't doing well with these new ideas, but at more local levels many planners and administrators have changed disaster plans and underlying premises. During the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, San Francisco houses built on the unstable landfill of the Marina District collapsed and caught fire, and firefighters were overwhelmed with the task of fighting the flames with broken water mains. Volunteers helped carry heavy hoses from the waterfront, where a fireboat pumped seawater to put out the flames. The San Francisco Fire Department's report on the quake says, "Hundreds of citizen volunteers assisted the Fire Department at the Marina District fire and the collapse of a building at Sixth and Bluxome streets. Some, acting under the
direction of Department members, were instrumental in rescue and fire suppression operations. Clearly, the organization and direction of volunteers must be addressed." A more marked difference from the suspicion and divisiveness of such authority in the 1906 earthquake could not be found—though the writers of the report might have noted that the volunteers did well without being organized or more than haphazardly directed.

In the aftermath, the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team (NERT) program was created to train volunteers to take care of their neighborhoods and city in disaster. The fire department runs the program, which has trained more than seventeen thousand citizens. The city used the centennial of the 1906 quake to urge, via bus placards, billboards, and more, disaster preparedness in every home—not only the stockpiling of supplies but also the creation of emergency plans. The NERT program trusts citizens and distributes power to the thousands who have been trained in basic rescue, firefighting, and first-aid techniques and given safety vests, hardhats, and badges. What this city government has learned—or admitted—is that it is inadequate to respond to or control response to a disaster and that the only viable strategy is to invite citizens to take power. Nationwide, particularly since 9/11, citizen emergency response team programs are growing, and the disaster managers who have become part of city and regional government are generally free of the old clichés and fears about ordinary people’s behavior in disaster.

The San Francisco Fire Department estimates that an 8.3 earthquake with wind at ten miles an hour could generate 71 large fires, which would require 273 fire engines—though the city has only 41. On the other hand, said firefighter Ed Chu at my NERT training in late 2006, “eighty percent of people saved in a disaster can be saved without specialized skills.” He stressed that the timeliness of the rescue mattered most for those who were trapped, which is why neighbors are often more important than experts. At the end of the training, participants were divided into teams and given a list of emergencies to prioritize—nonfatally injured senior citizens, downed overhead electrical lines, and a small fire in a building in this town of densely packed wooden buildings where fire spreads readily. My team decided to put out the fire first, since it seemed like a chance to prevent greater harm, and were roundly scolded. The firefighters amazed me by saying, “In a disaster, property no longer matters. Only people matter.” We had come a long way from San Francisco in 1906.

Property matters in another sense: San Francisco’s government emphasizes that citizens are likely to be on their own for the first seventy-two hours after an earthquake, but the poor are unlikely to set aside the earthquake emergency kits and supplies, including food and water, the city urged all citizens to keep on hand. As for New Orleans, Hurricane Gustav threatened the city three years after Katrina, and the event was a measure of what had changed and what was still rotten. Images of water lapping over the levees flanking the Lower Ninth Ward suggested that they were not nearly high enough. The Superdome had a gigantic lock on it, and no one was invited to shelter in place. This time Mayor Nagin ordered a mandatory evacuation in time, but for the estimated thirty thousand without resources to evacuate themselves, this meant lining up for a long wait for buses to unknown destinations. The evacuees were processed, given wrist bracelets, and bused to warehouses, where they were confined. Many were subjected to arrest and imprisonment after background checks—though thanks to New Orleans’s shoddy record-keeping, many of them were arrested for charges that had been dismissed but not cleared. Background checks constitute part of the criminalization of disaster victims. An estimated half of all undocumented immigrants in New Orleans were trapped by fear of being denied services or deported and did not evacuate—and this population is deeply imperiled by such criminalization. Many who evacuated by means of the government vowed not to do so again.

It was hard this time around to say whether the problem was the system in that moment or the poverty that consigned so many to such a crude and criminalizing system. Many lessons had still not been learned. As the storm approached, CNN ran a teaser about rape, murder, and looting, and Nagin announced, in a threat played over and over, “Anyone who’s caught looting will be sent directly to Angola”—the notorious former slave plantation and current maximum-security prison. “You will go directly to Angola Prison and God bless you when you get there.” In the same speech he warned that the thousands of FEMA trailers from which those still displaced after three years had presumably been evacuated “will become projectiles” in the violent winds. New Orleans was vulnerable not only because of its setting—facing the great cauldron of
hurricanes that is the Caribbean across an eroded buffer zone of wetlands in an era of climate change—but because of its social divides and injustices.

Fixing those wrongs and wounds in New Orleans and everywhere else is the work that everyday disaster requires of us. Recognizing the wealth of meaning and love such work provides is the reward everyday disaster invites us to claim. Joy matters too, and that it is found in this most unpromising of circumstances demonstrates again the desires that have survived dreariness and division for so long. The existing system is built on fear of each other and of scarcity, and it has created more scarcity and more to be afraid of. It is mitigated every day by altruism, mutual aid, and solidarity, by the acts of individuals and organizations who are motivated by hope and by love rather than fear. They are akin to a shadow government—another system ready to do more were they voted into power. Disaster votes them in, in a sense, because in an emergency these skills and ties work while fear and divisiveness do not. Disaster reveals what else the world could be like—reveals the strength of that hope, that generosity, and that solidarity. It reveals mutual aid as a default operating principle and civil society as something waiting in the wings when it’s absent from the stage.

A world could be built on that basis, and to do so would redress the long divides that produce everyday pain, poverty, and loneliness and in times of crisis homicidal fear and opportunism. This is the only paradise that is possible, and it will never exist whole, stable, and complete. It is always coming into being in response to trouble and suffering; making paradise is the work that we are meant to do. All the versions of an achieved paradise sound at best like an eternal vacation, a place where we would have no meaning to make. The paradises built in hell are improvisational; we make them up as we go along, and in so doing they call on all our strength and creativity and leave us free to invent even as we find ourselves enmeshed in community. These paradises built in hell show us the hill where the ruins stood. Disaster sometimes knocks down institutions and structures and suspends private life, leaving a broader view of what lies beyond. The task before us is to recognize the possibilities visible through that gateway and endeavor to bring them into the realm of the everyday.