



A PARADISE BUILT IN HELL

REBECCA SOLNIT
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Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit (1961-) is the author of more than 20 books on feminism; western and indigenous history; popular power; social change; and hope and disaster, including 2009's ***A Paradise Built In Hell***. In this groundbreaking book, Solnit asserts that the most startling thing about disasters is not merely that so many people rise to the occasion in response, but that they do so with joy. And this reveals an unmet yearning for community, purposefulness, and meaning. Here is a passage from ***A Paradise Built In Hell***.

“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, more subtle disaster all its own. In a society in which participation, agency, purposefulness, and freedom are all adequately present, a disaster would only be 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.”