[music]
Louise Steinman: Welcome to the ALOUD podcast. I'm Louise Steinman, curator of the ALOUD series presented by the Library Foundation of Los Angeles. ALOUD is a series of dynamic lectures, readings, performances, and discussions that take place in the Mark Taper Auditorium at the historic downtown central library in the heart of Los Angeles. To learn more about ALOUD and learn how you can help the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, support the Los Angeles Public Library, please go to our website, www.aloudla.org. The ALOUD program you're about to hear was produced in 2009.
In her most recent book, A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster, Rebecca Solnit surveys disasters from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina and shows that the typical response to calamity is spontaneous altruism, self-organization, and mutual aid with neighbors and strangers calmly rescuing, feeding, and housing each other. Obviously, because we just have a disaster in our city, we can talk about that tonight also. What kind of communities were formed during that disaster?
A Paradise Built in Hell is a timely and important book from an author whose work consistently locates unseen patterns and meanings in broad cultural histories. Her [inaudible 00:01:44] through history, politics, nature writing, literary criticism, and memoir. In her book Wanderlust: A History of Walking, she took her readers on a leisurely journey through the pre-history, history, and natural history of bipedal motion.
Previous publications include Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics, A Field Guide to Getting Lost, As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art, and River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West, for which she received a Guggenheim and the National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism. She received a Lannan Literary Award for nonfiction in 2003. She is surely one of our most original thinkers in a interdisciplinary format working in America today.
Jon Wiener is a contributing editor to The Nation magazine. We are always delighted to have Jon as our interlocutor. He's a wonderful interviewer. He's a Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine, where he specializes in recent American history. His books include Historians in Trouble: Plagiarism, Fraud, and Politics in the Ivory Tower, Gimme Some Truth: The John Lennon FBI Files, Professors, Politics and Pop, and Come Together: John Lennon in His Time. Many of you know Jon from his afternoon drive-time radio program on KPFK 90.7 FM featuring interviews on politics and culture. My voice just changed. I grew up. Without further ado, please welcome Rebecca Solnit and Jon Wiener. Thank you.
[applause]
Jon Wiener: Welcome to everybody who showed up. Nice to see you, Rebecca. Altruism and solidarity. Thank you.
Rebecca Solnit: See? Mutual aid is what that was technically. No. See, this was social Darwinism would look like this.
[laughter]
Jon: So true.
Rebecca: But I'm not a social Darwinist.

Jon: So true.
Rebecca: Although this is not an emergency either. I hope.
Jon: That's true. You start this wonderful book with the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, as Louise said, something I didn't know very much about, and you have a lot of very vivid and compelling evidence of altruism and solidarity, starting with this soup kitchen you discovered.
Rebecca: One of many soup kitchens. I opened the book with the Mizpah Café, a café founded or a community kitchen founded in Golden Gate Park by a woman who appears to have been suddenly of a demi-monde creature. She was in masseuse, and when the earthquake hit at 5:04 in the morning, before she evacuated, I was just trying to remember, yes, it was the '89 that was 5:12 PM during the World Series, it was the '06 that was 5:04 AM. Although they didn't have daylight savings, and so it was actually dawn, whereas the earthquake anniversaries, we have to go to her before dawn, but I digress, Jon. Stop me from doing that.
Jon: Okay.
Rebecca: She has this hilarious list of how she put on her switch, her makeup, did her hair, put on her bustle, et cetera, before she evacuated her building down 120 flights of stairs. Found a friend, got kicked out of Union Square in downtown San Francisco because everything was burning, and they camped out in Golden Gate Park. One thing led to another; she started a community kitchen when she had nothing to cook with but a few tin cans and some spoons and things. People donated stuff from Oakland, and she was eventually feeding a few 100 people at a time, and with aplomb.
This group had come from Tonopah, Nevada. How many of you know that there is a Tonopah, Nevada? Wow. That's so great. Is it closer to here than San Francisco? Only spiritually closer. I was actually there last month. This group came from Tonopah, Nevada, to give aid, and what's now the Mizpah Hotel existed as the Mizpah bars, and they were so smitten with what she'd done, they changed the name of this emergency kitchen from the Palace Hotel, which is a sarcastic name after the biggest luxury hotel in the world then still existing now. The one Enrico Caruso evacuated from the earthquake saying that's a terrible thing, and he was never coming back and never did.
They donated all this. They named it the Mizpah Café, which is from this Hebrew word for meeting place or watchtower, an emergency or token between those who are separated. It was really just one of many kitchens. One that I was equally fascinated with was this wonderful policeman, a phrase you don't often hear falling from my lips, but the policeman seemed to be very much of the people and not prone to panic and false notions of crowd control and that disaster. This policeman, Officer Schmidt, was downtown in the produce district when the earthquake hit and did some useful things like pull a dead body out of rubble and shoot a few grievously wounded horses and a few unnecessary things.
He afterwards regretted preventing some people from taking some cigars because the store burnt down afterwards anyway. You might as well smoke them individually rather than all at once. It was a classic disaster thing in that his wife and daughters had heard terrible things about downtown and were terribly worried about him. He'd heard that the whole mission had burnt down and was terribly worried too. Of course, everybody was fine, but they weren't

allowed back into their house, so they dragged their house, their brand new stove out, and these were the old stoves where you burn things in them, not gas or electric stoves.
They set up a community kitchen at the corner of what's now Dolores Park, which was then just finishing being an exhumed Jewish cemetery, and also fed the neighborhood. A local musician would come and sing and play a piano somebody had rolled out on the street. He has this wonderful phrase where he said it was about as homey as it could be, considering that everybody was homeless and the city was burning down.
This was really normal. There are actually hundreds of these. The earthquake anniversary online thing that combines the collections of a lot of the major libraries in California has hundreds of these pictures of people at these community kitchens. It's like, "Okay, now we cook in the streets. Now we cook for the neighbors." Everybody-- Jack London was there, remarked on the enormous aplomb and even humor with which people got through the disaster. There were a lot of funny jokes, the most famous of which is a sign on one of these community kitchens that said, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we may have to go to Oakland."
[laughter]
Oh, good. You can still make people laugh about that. It's another one of those San Francisco things like Mark Twain saying the coldest winter he ever spent that he can't get a rise out of anyone at home anymore.
Jon: Californians, we're told at the time of the San Francisco earthquake that there's a great danger of rioting and looting and the collapse of civilization, which requires the mobilization of the National Guard, the Army, the police. What role did the officials play in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906?
Rebecca: Can I ask the audience another question? You guys mostly know Tonopah. How many of you saw the movie Earthquake with Charlton Heston? You poor things. Which has the genuine marauding crowds.
Jon: It's actually why. You asked them why? Why did you say--
Rebecca: Late-night reruns, I'm sure. What was I going to say? The US army had a huge presence at the Presidio in the Golden Gate, the north end of the city, and the commander was out of the area. The second in command, this monster named Funston, we foolishly named some things out after, later, marched his 2,000 troops into the city. His assumption, and this happens a lot, same in Katrina, too, is that since people are about to behave badly, a massive military presence of oppression prevents that, which is saying that the garlic I wear around my neck is why I haven't been bitten by vampires.
They're often saying, and you see this actually with other things. I was just talking to John about the Republican National Convention in 2004. People often believe that because of enormous repression, no hideous incidents of violence took place without actually producing any evidence. There might have been incidents of violence, but so also the National Guard was called out. The mayor, who had been a populist, lost his mind and issued a shoot-to-kill order for anybody looting, which is this crazy thing that sometimes happens in disaster. Looting doesn't happen that much. It's stuff like people taking cigars. They are going to burn or taking necessary [crosstalk].
Jon: Can I interrupt with this question? What is looting?
Rebecca: Looting is a word that should be banished from the English

language, and it's constantly used in the context of disaster, and as though there's this special thing, and it's one of those words of flickering flames and marauding hordes, and then they're going to cannibalize your daughters or something. It's one of those incendiary words. One thing happens quite a bit in disaster, which I call requisitioning, which is that there is no money. What?
Jon: They're chuckling.
Rebecca: Yes, there is no money. Nobody's in business. You can't go buy a box of band-aids. You can't buy emergency medicines. You can't buy food and water, so you take them. In 1906, a lot of grocers were like, "My store's going to burn down. It would be great if few people would remove all the groceries first," even though some of the people then removing those groceries were shot as looters.
Then, there's another thing which we have in ordinary everyday life that many of you have already heard of, which is called theft. Theft is when you take things that aren't particularly necessary, and the thing is, who the hell cares? We have theft every day. We don't have capital punishment without trial for it, an ordinary life. When people are dying and things are burning down and there are these huge emergencies taking place, the fact that somebody took some boxes of aspirin and some diapers or something becoming the major focal point of obsession is crazy.
Jon: The army was sent in to deal with this [crosstalk] looting.
Rebecca: The army was sent in to repress the socially-- give me that water back, the marauding hordes who were undoubtedly going to behave badly. It's interesting, though, the description of how people behave badly, there's really two categories, which I think of as sheep and wolves. The sheep theory, which you see in movies like Earthquake mostly, is that we're going to mill around aimlessly and maybe run into the fire instead of out of it and need some fully jointed action figure to take care of us. If you're female, you're going to scream a lot that you're basically helpless and stupid and incapable of taking care of yourself, which is completely false. Then, the wolf theory is that, actually, you're going to revert.
You see this phrase constantly, that the thin veneer of civilization, and they used it in the 1906 earthquake and many other disasters. When Katrina happened, this guy who's done other good work but wrote this-- and The Guardian, however, Timothy wrote this completely idiotic column about how the thin veneer of civilization has peeled back and what lies beneath was his title, What Lies Beneath. He just believed all the media hysteria about Katrina that later turned out to be media hysteria.
Jon: We'll get to Katrina.
Rebecca: We'll get to Katrina. There really is this belief that only the threat of violence of the state is what prevents us from being marauding hordes all the time. When the state isn't there with its implicit threat of violence, the rest of us really do revert. That actually turns out not to be true. Should we talk about-- go, ask me a question about disaster sociologists, Jon?
Jon: I understand there's a field of disaster sociology, something else I knew nothing about. What contribution have they made to this question?
Rebecca: Jon, you're doing so well.
[laughter]
Jon: Thank you.

Rebecca: Am I badgering you? Should I be more timid and subdued, or should I panic and shout for help?
[laughter]
Jon: Look at Charlton Heston. He's around the corner.
Rebecca: Have I become a marauding horde on stage? No. I just wanted to say that I got really interested in disaster long before I knew there was a field called disaster sociology myself, but these are people who set out after the Second World War to study disasters because our government was looking at how nice it might be to have an all-out global nuclear war that would end civilization as we knew it. But they're really curious about how we'd behave afterwards.
A fascinating thing, and it's very similar to language that Churchill and Mussolini, et cetera, had about massive civilian bombing during World War II. They tended to assume that human beings would behave so badly, either as sheep or as wolves, that essentially that their own citizens were a greater threat to the stability of the state than the enemies who bombs. When the United States government says that its citizens are a worse threat than an all-out nuclear war, you know that people definitely have some really weird notions.
They hired these sociologists to go out and study how do people actually behave in disasters. Other than Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there hadn't been a direct attack. Those were studied, and people did behave well, but they looked at a lot of things like hurricanes and earthquakes, et cetera, and explosions. Basically, every stereotype started to fall apart. It turned out this wonderful guy named Enrico Quarantelli, who was one of the founders of the field of disaster studies in the 1940s, is still at it, whatever it is, 65 years later. He wanted to do a master's thesis on panic, but it turned out that it was so vanishingly rare. There were no good examples in disaster.
A lot of things that are considered to be panic, where people get squished in crowds, actually have much more complex explanations having to do with physics and things. We won't get into them, but then all that stuff turned out, and they looked at a lot of other stuff and looting, which is also extraordinarily rare. Really, started to notice, and they were sociologists, so they're very careful and calm and statistically buttressed, even almost verging on boring at times about this that actually Hobbes was completely wrong and Kropotkin was right, and were actually very good at self-governance and absence of government. We actually tend to be very altruistic, and we actually tend to be full of mutual aid, and that people are actually good at improvisation and, for whatever reason you want to explain it, tend to take really good care of each other in crises.
Jon: Yet there was a great deal of violence and destruction in the San Francisco earthquake. Who was responsible for that?
Rebecca: Should we ask the audience to guess? Have you noticed a tendency to this-- it was the US Army, it was the National Guard, the cadets from UC Berkeley, who are given guns because we always like 18-year-old boys with guns running around. Usually, we like them to run around foreign soil. Then, some citizen vigilantes at-- and the citizen vigilantes' greatest triumph was shooting a distinguished citizen carrying a red cross flag because he didn't stop at a checkpoint, so they blasted him and somewhat regretted it later.

The city was burnt down, and there were not fires caused by the earthquake by broken gas means and broken chimneys, and that kind of stuff back in the days when people had a lot of kinds of fire in their houses with gaslights and candles and stoves, et cetera. The damage of the earthquake is hard to measure because five square miles of the city, more than 28,000 buildings burned down. A lot of it was done by the military, which decided to set fire breaks, except that they didn't know how to set fire breaks, so they set them too close to the fires, which meant they're basically breaking up houses so they'd burn more readily. They were using black powder, which set the houses on fire ahead of the arriving flames.

Jon: This is what we call news you can use. Don't use black powder in your fire breaks.

Rebecca: Never, never. Do you hear me? They did smart things like deciding to build fire breaks by blowing up buildings that turned out to be full of incredibly flammable or explosive things like a hundred-proof alcohol. Finally, they prevented the citizens, since citizens were considered to be either a marauding threat or a hapless nuisance, from fighting fires directly. Pretty much every neighborhood that managed to keep the army out and fight directly could do the kind of things like use wet gunny sacks and to slap sparks arriving from the flames and fight fire by hand.

It's interesting because a lot of-- the premise of my book is that there's no such thing as a natural disaster because the first casualty in earthquakes is architecture. If you're standing out in the open, nothing's going to fall on you. You're not going to get crushed. If you fall down from the height of-- you're 5 or 6 feet, you're probably not going to be that badly hurt. Even earthquakes, which are a lot more natural than almost anything else, aren't that natural. You see, most disasters, or many disasters, are made vastly worse by the way that the response is. Although some disasters unfold pretty well that 20 years ago, the 89 earthquake in San Francisco went pretty well, I don't really know enough about the earthquake you guys had a few years later to comment on it.

Jon: I want to stick with San Francisco for another minute. Just a footnote. As Louise said, I teach history at UC Irvine, and I'm very interested in these Berkeley students who were mobilized as part of the forces of military order at San Francisco. How did that work?

Rebecca: You mean, because it's Berkeley, is this a UC Irvine versus UC Berkeley?

Jon: No, no. It's a UC thing. Like this is, UC as part of the forces of order. How did that work?

Rebecca: I think it was a bit like the National Guard that, I don't know if it was like an ROTC program that the kids were in. The only reason I know about it is that I found this incredibly great quote from this kid who said, "Had we not rushed there with our rifles, all hell would have broken loose" and all these armed people. You see a different version of this. Katrina really believes that because we ran around and did terrifying things with guns, worse things didn't happen, and often they are the worst thing that happens.

Jon: Now, one of my favorite things in this part of your book is, you say, this raises philosophical questions. There was a philosopher who arrived on the scene to answer them, no less than William James, America's most famous philosopher.

Rebecca: Yes. This is the second rule of earthquakes. Don't use black powder at home; try and have a major philosopher on hand. They're not always available, but you yourself could become a major philosopher in an emergency. Who knows. William James, who was an old man at the time, was at Stanford and had been thinking about things that were very related. He just delivered his great talk, the moral equivalent of war in which he thought, and those days when people thought there could be an end to war altogether. He said that to end war needed to provide something to substitute for the people. He looked at the way that war provided in those days, when I think it was much more glamorized than it is now. A sense of common purpose and noble sacrifice and a real sense of meaning and urgency and solidarity that civilian life doesn't always have. He was really looking at though, even though he hated war, and this was part of the anti-imperialist league that Mark Twain was involved in, and this really strong reaction against the Spanish American War and all its opportunistic immorality.

He was really interested in where do you get these noble emotions that doesn't involve killing people for no good reason. He found it in the earthquake. He was shaken awake by the earthquake, was instantly exhilarated. Caught a train that morning with a friend who was worried about her sister in San Francisco, walked around San Francisco, returned a week later, and wrote the first great study of human nature and disaster. Should I read a little piece?

Jon: Please.

Rebecca: He's so lovely.

Jon: Yes.

Rebecca: Let's see if I really got all my post. It's in place. Yes. He wrote an essay that summer, and he said, "Two things, in retrospect, strike me especially, and are the most emphatic of all my impressions. Both are reassuring as to human nature. The first was the rapidity of the improvisation of order out of chaos." The second thing that struck him was the universal equanimity. "We soon got letters from the east ringing with anxiety and pathos, but I now know fully what I have always believed, that the pathetic way of feeling great disasters belongs rather to the point of view of people at a distance rather than the immediate victims. I heard not a single really pathetic or sentimental word in California expressed by anyone."

He added that "Surely the cutting edge of all our usual misfortunes comes from their character of loneliness. That is when my house burns down and everybody else's fine, I'm kind of cast out of the community, or I've suffered something nobody is really connected to, and I don't know, your lives are all together. Mine isn't. Whereas when the whole city burns down, we're all in this together. I'm not alone. In fact, I might be much more connected than I'm ordinarily. We're now in a reality where people don't have houses rather than the ordinary reality where everybody has a house, except that now I don't."

The hilarious thing is that his brother, Henry James, not one of my favorite novelists, was having histrionics in London about how hideously William and Alice James must be suffering while they were having this really rich and interesting time, which is also true of disasters often that people at a distance are willing to believe all kinds of things. After the '89 earthquake, I had a cousin in Canada who's convinced that the Bay Bridge had fallen into the water.

Jon: It was closed for a day last week, I think.
Rebecca: Well, for several days for repairs. There was a panel that collapsed in '89, but it didn't fall in the water.
Jon: That's about it. The disaster sociologist key concept was elite panic.
Rebecca: That came really recently. Well, there's a lot of amazing people now at work, many of whom I got to talk to. Guy named Lee Clark with his collaborator, Karen Chess, coined this term elite panic, which I first heard from Kathleen Tierney talking about the anniversary of the '06 earthquake right after Katrina. Where she said, "There's no such thing as public panic, but there is elite panic," which she diagnosed as consisting of willingness to use deadly force unnecessarily, fear of the public, particularly of poor and non-white people, uprising property over human life, and a few other things.
It's funny because it really describes very much what happened in '06, and it also describes Katrina so much. Those are the disasters that begin in my book. They're very, very similar in a lot of ways. It's funny because a lot of the worst stuff that happened in Katrina that people still have trouble believing, or they have trouble framing that that's really what happened also happened 99 years earlier. For me, having that frame of reference was really helpful for looking at the more recent events.
Jon: So San Francisco in 1906, we see altruism, solidarity, this--
Rebecca: On the part of the great majority of improvisation, humor, cooking.
Jon: Cooking, very important part of this.
Rebecca: Yes.
Jon: We referred a few times to New Orleans in the wake of the failure of the breaching of the levees after the hurricane hit. Here, the story is a lot more about elite panic and what followed.
Rebecca: Again, with Katrina, first of all, it's important to say I focused on New Orleans because this is a book about urban disaster. I did go to Biloxi and decided not to write about it that much. It's important to say that it affected 90,000 square miles and not just the medium-sized city of New Orleans, but New Orleans was hit by the hurricane, but not that hard. It was the levees breaking, which was completely unnatural since-- well, there's lots of reasons why there was a lot of canals that should have never been built in the first place. The MRGO canal nicknamed the hurricane highway that brought the storm surges directly into the Lower Ninth.
Many, many things went wrong. The lack of an evacuation plan that would take care of people who didn't have resources to evacuate. Immediately afterwards, the mayor-- and I should point out because it wasn't a perfect Black-white thing, it wasn't a perfectly simple divide. The mayor and the police chief were Black, and engage in as much elite panic as anybody ever did. They were obsessed with the notion that the public was the great danger. The mayor, according to Douglas Brinkley, was afraid to come out of his hotel tower and walk across the street to the Superdome and reassure his people, as Johnson had actually done during Hurricane Betsy. President Johnson.
The police chief was just kind of having hysterics, and he eventually had a nervous breakdown or something, and they was actually spreading these rumors on Oprah and everywhere else about babies being raped and hundreds of dead bodies in the Superdome, et cetera. The media was all too willing to believe these things, and the national and international media began spreading

these rumors. There was a panic on the part of the elite that's the media and on the part of these people who were supposed to be leaders who weren't really leading anything.
The governor, who was somewhat more sympathetic in other ways, bought into it as well. She's the one who promised that the troops fresh from Iraq were heading for New Orleans. This is when people were still dying on rooftops and stranded and needed their diabetes and blood pressure medicine, and old people were dying of heat stroke and et cetera. She promised that they were sending troops in, and they were locked and loaded. They had M16s and they knew how to use them. I actually rented the movie Escape from New York afterwards because-- I should keep asking questions. How many of you have seen Escape from New York?
[laughter]
Oh, it's a great movie. What's his name? Snake Plissken at-- They turned New Orleans into a prison city. The sheriff of Gretna was so convinced that the hordes of New Orleans were going to destroy civilization as he knew it that he and his henchmen turned people back at gunpoint from evacuating the destroyed city. Over the bridge to the right bank of the river, some places had running water, some places had power, you could evacuate to the rest of the continental North America. You could be taken care of, and they would not let anybody across. They were firing bullets over their heads, threatening them at gunpoint and turning back tourists and people with babies and old people, and people could prove that they lived on that side of the river and everybody else. One of the really big crimes of Katrina.
Jon: We have the elite panic in New Orleans and the most dramatic with the most fatal consequences, but there was also a different phenomenon of those in Algiers of white lower middle class vigilantes.
Rebecca: These people weren't exactly an elite but they definitely saw themselves in that Southern way that I think some White men with guns have as maintaining civilization at gunpoint, which I find a slightly dubious enterprise at best, but anyway, they were so terrified. It's this weird thing. Some of them, from what they said, seemed to think this was a great opportunity to have a race war and get away with it while no one was paying attention or undercover of the chaos of the storm. Some of them seemed to genuinely believe there was going to be monumental looting.
What's interesting is that many of them have said that they shot people. Donnell Harrington, who survived, who was on Spike Lee's documentary about the storm and became one of my main sources, survived being shot twice, point blanket, by somebody who didn't even see before he got shot. He was not threatening anybody. He'd actually saved hundreds of lives, saved his grandparents, gotten them evacuated, and was trying to just walk to an evacuation point, which happened to involve walking through this neighborhood when he got shot.
Donnell was a Brinks truck driver at the time and just wanted to get the hell out of there. A guy who drives around trucks with $500,000 worth of bills in them is not really somebody who's that excited about going and getting your TV while he's hoping for a bus ride to Houston. What's interesting about these guys is that they're very adamant they needed to shoot people. They're very adamant that basically any Black men they saw, even though Black men actually lived

in that community, were looters. They never said that anything was stolen and they never reported a garden hose or a flower pot or a mailbox flag stolen or attempted stolen, et cetera. Of course, they can use the vampire defense that because there were shooting everything that moved, there was no looting.
Jon: This story wasn't reported very much. In fact, it's only really been researched by you and a couple of your friends.
Rebecca: Yes. This was one of the things that made me crazy. I think it was really because of the disaster sociologists I'd been talking for a few years at that point because of the knowledge I had of what really transpired in the '06 earthquake and because I live at a peculiar cross point between counterculture and mainstream. A lot of people knew what had happened but the media didn't really want to touch it.
This astonished me because if you spent time in New Orleans, the place was saturated with media and like it was the biggest story for months in the world and foreign precedent people and lots of independent filmmakers were there, and Spike Lee interviewed Donnell Harrington, but he didn't say, "Who the hell shot you? Let's find out. Let's talk to the DA. Let's see what's being done." That was on national television.
There were a few stories about the vigilantes, CNN in the Times-Picayune in the New Orleans newspaper, both ran pictures of this guy taking a nap next to the biggest scariest arsenal I've ever seen in my life and talked about how these people had organized to defend their neighborhood. When you see a vigilante with a giant arsenal saying that they're organizing against looters, and I went to journalism school, there are two really easy questions that you would flunk if you didn't ask in your first semester, which are, were there looters? Did they shoot them?
Nobody could bring themselves to ask either of those questions, and the answer seemed to be, no, there weren't looters, and yes, they did shoot them. A number of the vigilantes also confessed, and I had talked to the young medics at the Common Ground Clinic nearby, and people who came in needed their medicine, needed their tetanus shots, needed their antiseptics, or whatever, but they also needed to tell their stories. A number of people who came in said, "Yes, we killed people," "We killed several people," "We killed six people," or "We killed eight people."
I talked to these very disturbed young volunteers who had had all these murder confessions handed to them, and I'd seen Donnell, and I talked to Malik Raheem, who was one of the founders of Common Ground that supported this clinic, who's an African American man who'd seen the neighborhood almost erupt in a race war and been terrified it's going to end up in a shootout and seen a number of dead bodies in a place that did not flood, and his pretty harsh way of saying that, "No, these were not storm victims." When half of somebody's face is blown away, you know that's not a hurricane. If you wanted to know, you could know. This was not a secret, and these guys were boasting about it, and nobody would touch the story. I'm not really an investigative journalist, and I'm terrified of trigger-happy murderers. I'm a little scared of them, I would say, not terrified.
I recruited A.C. Thompson, who I think is the best and toughest investigative reporter I've ever met. The nation backed him to do the story. He spent two and a half years on it at this point. Many more people have confessed to him. He's

found other victims. He's found a number of stories of the police. He's pieced together a lot of things of witnesses, victims, and shooters and has a lot of the story enough that the FBI is now investigating that and several other crimes that he wrote about, and some other incidents like the shooting of unarmed civilians on the Danziger Bridge by undercover cops.
Jon: We have lots of evidence of of the wolf emerging and the--
Rebecca: Well, the elite panic, we should say.
Jon: The mirror being peeled off on the part of the forces of order, where's the altruism, the solidarity in the community in New Orleans?
Rebecca: You know how they say police spend 95% of their time with the worst 5%, and we've just spent 95% of our time talking about the worst 5%. What was really interesting in Katrina is that people actually organized really well, and the gang members supposedly marauding in the convention center, according to one woman who was stranded there, were essentially protecting people and getting diapers and water and things, looking out for elders and things like that.
I visited a school where a bunch of people had taken shelter. It was a multi-story school, so there were above the flood waters. This very poignant thing on the blackboard about, "Sorry, that we messed up your school. We sheltered here for days. The Coast Guard wouldn't come for us." It was clearly like these inner city hip-hop youth, and they signed all their names. We got the community here, and I heard many, many stories, and then these volunteers started to shop.
This is one of the things that I found so moving and amazing. Hurricanehousing.org was a offshoot of Moveon.org. Even as we're being told that these were terrifying sadistic monsters who wanted to eat babies for breakfast raw and there were all these hysterical stories, none of which turned out to be true. Hurricanehousing.org put up a site and 200,000 people across the country volunteered rooms in their houses to take in people who were displaced by the hurricane.
Jon: People who they didn't know. People who they'd never met.
Rebecca: Strangers, and some of them were funny because they're like, "Okay, we want a mother and daughter. We want you to have a work ethic, whatever, we'll take a family but we won't take single man." Which were pretty reasonable things when you're inviting complete strangers from another part of the country into your house. Most of them were so open and generous. They ranged from like these really pious Christians to bisexual San Francisco vegan households.
Then the volunteer effort, and even I think the most important story in Katrina, and the least told one, the vigilantes, are important because we need to understand what really happens in disaster so people like that won't feel justified, it won't get overlooked, et cetera. What we really need to see is that people took care of themselves and then volunteers started to show up.
There's this amazing photograph as shown by a doctor who'd been there of this bumper-to-bumper traffic of boat trailers of these sort of what's called the Cajun Navy, the White guys in the surrounding countryside trying to get into New Orleans with their boats so they could go into that flood water and pull people off roofs.
They did. Hundreds of people were rescued by every boat going in there a lot

of times as gorillas because they were being told, "It's too dangerous. We're not letting you in there." Then the volunteers to rebuild started to come, and the people ran in community kitchens. Community kitchens are wonderful because they like your kitchen at home. It's a gathering place but for a much larger community and they're in the 1906 earthquake. There were some wonderful ones in 9/11, and there were some amazing ones in Katrina, some of which went until late last year.

Hundreds of thousands of volunteers have come through New Orleans. It's been like freedom summer during the civil rights movement, where people came down to register voters but also to be in solidarity, to see what was going on and to be woken up in some way, and I constantly talked to volunteers who said, "Oh, I came down here for a week and nine months later, I haven't been able to leave yet," or "I came down here to do this, but they really needed to finish carpenter, so I'm still here six months later." People just found most of us don't have an everyday life, and we've gotten -- violence is very exciting to talk about and

Rebecca: I think we just had something a little bit like local news hour here. It's our fault, John. What I was really interested in, because we already know about violence, you don't need a disaster to have it. It happens in everyday life, even though it's not something most of us do.

Here, I just want to say that the way that the news and the commentary go is like, okay, if one of you turns out to be a person who roasts and eats small children, somebody would write an editorial about how we are all baby eaters. If 99 of us aren't baby eaters, I'm not sure that-- There's this weird way people will generalize about the worst behavior, but the majority of behavior is actually fantastic and amazing.

Katrina was just this extraordinary outpouring, and because this first story was the false stories of savage, black hoards, marauding-- Actually, there were some rumors of cannibalism that were completely fabricated. Then there were these two stories about the crimes that were on the part of the elite.

The majority story is still not that visible, which is what ordinarily happens in disasters, which probably happened in the fires, which is what we usually call altruism or mutual aid. Mutual aid is often discussed as, well, this is necessary to our survival. I take care of you because then our species or our tribe or my gene pool survives. People do things that are not about their own well-being and disaster. People go above and beyond in these ways that just astonish me.

We're two days away from the eighth anniversary of 9/11, the first post Bush anniversary where I think we can start to remember what really happened a little bit better. I believe I have an editorial about that in the LA Times tomorrow morning. [unintelligible 00:41:41] dispatch.com at full length. There's this guy, John Gilfoy, who describes running from that hideous dust cloud as the towers are collapsing, and it's shards of glass and toxic dust. It's just the most terrifying thing.

Unlike a hurricane or an earthquake, something nobody's ever anticipated. This is the most bizarre thing that's ever happened to anybody in lower Manhattan. John Gilfoy is running with his officemates, and these are not the people he loves best in the world, or his family, or his gene pool or something. He's running with his workmates, and he's a college athlete so he can run faster than them for the most terrifying dust clouds anybody's ever seen. He

slows down. That's the kind of story you hear over and over that amazes me so much.
In the Charlton Heston movies, you trample your office workers to escape until Charlton Heston stops you, or you just fall down and scream until he carries you away. This guy's slowing down, which is such how people behave and so not how we think of it. It's one of the most breathtaking stories for me that I collected. I collected a lot of really amazing stories if I say so myself. They're not my stories. I just collected them.
Jon: They are amazing stories. Louise, what's our timeframe here?
Louise: We should probably open up maybe five more minutes.
Jon: A couple of big questions at the end here. How do you explain the altruism and solidarity that you have found? You talk in your book about human nature, but we teach our college students today that human nature is a pathetic fallacy, that it's a cultural construct, that it's contingent. Do you believe that you've found human nature?
Rebecca: Watch out for postmodernists in an emergency situation is how I can say.
[laughter]
No. I think that there is a point in saying that it's dangerous to generalize about human nature. I was reading about an interview with Philip Zimbardo who conducted the Stanford experiments where they got college boys to act like prison guards and abused other kids who were pretending to be prisoners and stuff. Human nature is malleable, but most of the counts of people behaving badly, I've seen it has to be directed by-- it often requires disinformation, recruitment, setting up structures, et cetera.
What's interesting about this is that most utopias we look at, it's like a bunch of us believe something different. We're socialists or we're commune arts, or we want to go back to the land and it's 1974. This disaster happens across the board. You and your Republican neighbor and the Latter-day Saints up the street are all on the boat together, and you're not making some decision that you want life to be different. Life is different. What are you going to do about it?
People in this circumstance, and it really feels for me like those moments when there's a power outage and then the machines all reset themselves to the original settings. I do have a sense that people reset themselves to the original settings. So many people, and this is really where my project started, and this is what I think is most important, when you talk to them about disasters, I have this enormous sense of joy, and it's the last thing you expect. I talked to you about your fire or your earthquake or the snowstorm or the blackout, and your face lights up.
I've seen this hundreds of times now because people found in those moments the purposefulness, the community, and the power that's missing from our lives most of the time. Really in some ways, and I feel like almost I didn't say this strongly enough, everyday life is a disaster for most of us. We're isolated, we're alienated, we're not giving meaningful work, we don't have a sense of power and agency over our own lives.
In a disaster, you need to dig someone out of the rubble. You need to improvise a kitchen. Everybody around you has just been to the same thing. You can talk to anyone. After 9/11, everybody talks about how everyone in New

York would make eye contact and say just with solicitation, how are you? How are you doing? Are you okay? Did you lose anyone? Et cetera. The abbot of the Zen Center in the village said it was like everyone became a Buddhist for a month, which is a lot to say of New Yorkers.
Jon: This is my closing big question. The thesis of your book is that the worst events can bring out the best in people.
Rebecca: That sounds so uplifting.
Jon: What about this reset that you talked about? Why is this so difficult to sustain in everyday life once normality returns?
Rebecca: I think that we have enormous number of systems that would prefer that we believe that we're Hobbesian creatures, which is that life is nasty, brutish, and short, and it's a struggle of each against each, that our government doesn't transform but just represses. I don't actually rip out John's throat in the green room for his wallet, for example.
Jon: For example?
Rebecca: Yes. How much are you carrying?
[laughter]
You haven't drunk your water.
Jon: [unintelligible 00:46:48]. Pardon me.
Rebecca: What I also really realized, there's these wonderful economist I quote who say that if anybody's asked, we say we live in a capitalist society, and capitalism is the notion there's not enough to go around. We all have to compete for it. The way that we generally frame it is very social Darwinist that survival of the fittest, et cetera. When you look at what our society actually consists of, the relationship between parents and children, except in my family, wasn't social Darwinist.
That one did go over that, but that there's enormous numbers of relationships of generosity, of non-reciprocal giving, of reciprocal giving of gift communities. Although the society we live in is far from perfect, if it weren't for these church groups and these volunteers and these activists and these people doing things that are not necessarily self-serving, that are not necessarily geared towards their own benefit, that are not competitive.
What I see much more is how much these things are present in everyday life for a lot-- not enough, not powerfully enough, and to the extent they give people joy. When you ask volunteers why they deliver these meals on wheels, why they read to blind people, et cetera, I will always assume that they're being noble and self-sacrificing, but they'll say, "I feel so much better. I don't know if I'm doing anything for them, but I get something out of it."
It's really interesting because after 9/11, you saw this incredible need to do something. People were so frustrated because they couldn't give blood, they couldn't volunteer. They wanted to do something. That desire that I think most of us have all the time was sharpened to this urgent, anxious intensity. What I feel is that some of it is present. Some people find ways to acknowledge those desires and to act on them, but we don't have enough of a language for it.
I think it takes constantly being told that we're selfish, we're greedy, that we should be afraid of each other, et cetera, to create a society as lousy as it is. People still do wonderful and amazing things. With this other information, I feel like it's useful to know in disasters. This is a handy book for knowing that kind of stuff. I feel much more it looks at what we most deeply desire and who

we could be, the stuff we don't even have a language for.
I wrote about the Mexico City earthquake, and I felt that those people had a much richer language for civil society, for public life, for being a member of a community. They had an amazing disaster out of which radical transformation of the entire political life of Mexico spring for the better. I feel that this information is a platform for looking at these needs. We always talk about human beings as these private creatures. We want sex and we want love and we want all this private stuff.
You saw this with Obama campaign, you see this in these public moments of crisis and possibility. People want to be members of a society. They want to be citizens, they want to have a voice, they want agency. That's something we don't get, and that's something that it's not going to get marketed to you by advertisers. We really need that language to describe and that vision to claim the stuff that's in most of us. That's possible in the society at large.
Jon: Stuff that's in most of us. I've gotten to ask a lot of my questions. I bet some of these people here have their own questions.
Rebecca: What is in most of you? Does that sound like dinner? [laughter] Yes, madam
Jon: You're supposed to wait for the microphone.
Rebecca: All right.
Speaker 4: My question is pretty simple, and maybe you answer it in the book. I haven't read it yet, but what was your motivation for writing this?
Rebecca: Was it selfish?
Speaker 4: No. Do you feel much better after having done that?
Rebecca: I'm teasing.
Speaker 4: Just the purpose why this project and this thesis.
Rebecca: It's one of those funny chains of events, and I like tracing causalities, how things really happen and the great unlikeliness of most things. I was invited to give the Raymond Williams' memorial lecture at Cambridge. He was a radical blue-collar social philosopher and cultural historian at Cambridge. I thought, okay, for Raymond Williams, even though it turned out Cambridge didn't deserve anything at all, but Raymond Williams deserved a lot. I thought I should start a new topic.
I'd just been to Halifax Nova Scotia, which was also the site of one of the five major disasters I wrote about, the 1917 Halifax explosion. In 2003 I think it was, they'd had a major hurricane. The guy who told me about it, his face lit up with joy when he told me about it. I thought, I saw this after 9/11, I saw this after the '89 quake. This is really ubiquitous. This is really interesting. There's something strange here, something that doesn't fit into our conventional. I began to explore it. I was also commissioned to write about the '06 earthquake and found all these amazing stories there.
I did the talk, which was a complete bomb because of stuff we won't go into about Britain and Cambridge, and delivered it at other places where it went over better. Turned it into an essay for Harper's that went to press on August 29th, 2004, which happened to be the day Hurricane Katrina hit. I actually called my editor on the phone and said, "I think we need to make some changes." He said, "It's too late, but now you're above the masthead on the magazine's cover."
When I saw the incredible willingness to believe these malicious rumors and

hysterical stereotypes, et cetera, I really felt like-- I was reluctant. I waited a year, but I thought, "Okay, I need to do a book." With this project all along that, I felt somebody who decided to open the door onto a room and found that it was actually a door that led to the huge giant landscape that hadn't been mapped, much hadn't been explored. This book feels rough to me in some ways compared to a lot of them.
To go back to motives, one of it was I thought it might be useful for people to know this stuff. Useful not only as a disaster preparation, but for these larger questions about what we most deeply desire and who we might be able to be individually and collectively.
To satisfy my own curiosity, I'd written a book about hope. This project felt very different when I started it, and it very much an extension of it when I was done with it. For my own satisfaction, I make a living by scrambling madly. I actually got paid for it. It was a mix of making a living, intellectual curiosity, and my own social commitments. That was a great question. Thank you. Not a simple one. You have a question.
Speaker 5: I do.
Rebecca: You did?
Speaker 5: I do.
Rebecca: Oh, but you don't have a microphone. Nevermind.
Speaker 5: I don't have a microphone. What you've talked about the elite panic, what signs can you see? For example, my mind is running a mile a minute now, and I'm thinking about the testimony of the head of the National Security Agency in February, in which he said that the biggest threat to security in the United States is economic collapse and the panic that would be attendant upon it. Do you see any other signs of that preparation for elite panic?
Rebecca: I have to say that elite panic is not completely wrong. Essentially, they're terribly afraid of social upheaval and social change because they are the status quo. The status quo is what gets changed in revolution upheaval, et cetera. Economic crises do lead to upheaval. Argentina's economy collapsed and they went through four presidents in about four weeks and swung to the left and became a very different and much more open and empowered society. Essentially, what they're saying is that basically, they're afraid of us. It's funny because a lot of the left talks as though they're these scary omniscient beings, and we're helpless and powerless. You look at how frightened of us they are, and that's one thing I'll absolutely give them that they're right about. It's also interesting. I was talking to John about this before. There's something I call safe dangers where they'd like to portray us as criminals often.
During the Republican National Convention, activists were portrayed as criminals, and most of them were very committed to non-violence. They were anti-war, et cetera. The media picked up all these hot tips from the Bush administration that they were going to bomb TV trucks and throw urine in police's faces, and had all these other exciting terrorist things they were going to do. No evidence was ever produced.
What I felt it was really about is to say that these activists are dangerous, but they're dangerous because they can change the status quo, even to acknowledge that this is not the natural order of things. This is a status quo, and it can be changed, I think is somewhat dangerous idea. To acknowledge that these scruffy people might change the world is extremely terrifying. You

make it much safer by just saying that they're common criminals who are going to do bad things we can throw them into prison for, and that you shouldn't listen to them and you shouldn't like them, and they're not at all like you.
That economics comment I found absolutely fascinating because in some ways, I don't want violence and et cetera, but I think that radical social change might actually be a really excellent thing right about now. Maybe they should be afraid, but they will portray it as they always portray it as hysterical, out of control, rabble doing really nonsensical things for really sleazy motives, rather than that maybe we don't need to have lots of poor people and a few insanely rich people in this country or whatever. Other questions? Yes, ma'am. Microphone coming. I'm learning.
Speaker 6: Are disasters great equalizers? In New Orleans, it seemed disproportionately poor people were stranded on those roofs. Here with the fires, it's affluent neighborhoods and people trying to guard their homes with hoses. Just curious.
Rebecca: They can be, and they're often spoken of as though they were. I think that the earlier disaster sociologists, for example, were more colorblind and more idealistic, but there can be these moments when you're running from a giant dust cloud, it doesn't matter if you're a taxi driver or the biggest commodities trader on the floor, the dust cloud is coming for both of you. Afterwards, the moment of disasters often very unselective in that respect, but things start to sort themselves out very soon after.
In the '89 earthquake, the wealthy marina district had a lot of damage and fire. Those people were offered room in luxury hotels. Homeless people were like, "Hey, we're homeless, too." They're like, "Yes, well, stay that way." You see a lot of different stuff. Katrina is complicated. There's nothing you can say about race and class in Katrina that there aren't exceptions to, and there were wealthy people to whom terrible things happened.
Wonderful activist Pam Dashiell from the Lower 9th talked about this middle-class white man who was just so completely disoriented because he just couldn't believe that he was also in this same boat of being a man without property, without papers, without anything. It does happen, but even the way disaster relief is given, people who have lots of paperwork and are really good at filling out forms do a lot better.
New Orleans has I think it was 60% functional literacy. To get any funding to rebuild, you had to fill out more bureaucracy than all of the most complicated tax forms you've ever seen in your life. Three years later, they were just beginning to release money. It can be an equalizer, and often, people feel very connected.
One of the misnomers in the '06 earthquake was that one of the stupid commanders of the military had these rich people say, "Oh, the poor people feel that we didn't suffer enough and are going to burn down our houses. We're terrified of them. You have to go and smash all of the liquor bottles and all of the liquor stores and herd these people around, et cetera." In fact, in San Francisco, the wealthiest mansions in the Chinatown and the poorest neighborhoods and et cetera burnt down. Of course, when you're really wealthy, you often have a second home to go to, et cetera. There was some kind of equalization there.

The city fathers tried to force the Chinese out of Chinatown, which is still prime real estate in San Francisco. The Chinese and the Chinese government and some other businessmen kind of-- so that there's often the kinds of exploitation and an inequality often reappear, but often, a lot of things change as well.
This wonderful group, a woman of the storm form, which were the really elite women in New Orleans, they suddenly realized they had something in common with everyone else because their city wasn't going to come back just with rich people. They used the fact that they were very good at accessing politicians and people with power to bring attention to New Orleans and left rebuilding and community kitchens and stuff to other people.
So often, I think people feel connected in different ways. A lot of racial lines were crossed. Malik Raheem said to me that, [unintelligible 01:00:48] was having all these white people to come in solidarity with the Black community he was very connected to, and how a lot of Black people in that part of the south hadn't seen that before. It really changed the way they felt and thought about things in meaningful ways. There's one right there, too.
Speaker 7: I'm curious to know now what you're working on following this book.
Rebecca: I felt like I spent a lot of the Bush administration doing these very abstract international and often fairly tough projects. This one was tough. I spent a lot of time in New Orleans and New York and Mexico City reading stories about worst-case scenarios and stuff. I really wanted to come home, and I felt like Obama let me take a little bit of time off from being in the fray. I'm doing an Atlas of San Francisco in the Bay Area with a whole bunch of artists and writers with SFMOMA and UC Press.
How many of you know who Sandow Birk is? He said he's going to do something for me today, and I'm so excited. He's one of my favorite artists. It's also a very political project where I feel like in an era of climate change, you need to learn to travel without going very far, and that it's always empowering to know where you are, and where you stand, and who else is there.
It's a cultural, historical, and political atlas that I hope will be enormously pleasurable, but also empowering in that sense of giving people those kinds of connections that I think matter. Shall we take his question? Thank you. I can never resist a man with a giant skull on his t-shirt.
[laughter]
Speaker 8: Thanks for the compliment. Since the last of your writings that you just described are pretty much about disasters, did the disasters ever overwhelm you or something? If they did,8 what was it that kept you going throughout since 9/11, pretty much?
Rebecca: Actually 9/11, I had that weird experience, or I noticed that everybody felt in this country where most people I think feel that their lives are-- they don't even feel it. Their lives are pretty trivial. There was this extraordinary thing, and I love that I noticed everywhere where people stopped, there was this beautiful opening where everybody wanted to talk about meaning. People's hearts and minds were wide open. They want to talk about foreign policy and stuff. I thought that was magnificent.
I saw the Bush administration try and shut that door furiously, and they did. There's not many things I'll say the Bush administration did a good job of, but

they did a great job of shutting down a lot of that open-mindedness, that willingness to rethink our energy policy and our consumption to think about violence and war and death and power and citizenship. 9/11, no, but the Katrina stuff got really tough. I got more angry. I'm still angry. There's very few things.
I'm very political and very connected to a lot of other things and I've done anti-war organizing and march and all that, but the way that the national media distorted the real stories or created these false stories and ignored the real stories in New Orleans, particularly the stuff around the vigilantes which nobody would touch and a lot of people still can't wrap their minds around, makes me really angry. That was hard. I got close to Danelle who suffered essentially.
It's funny sometimes when I read this stuff out loud, which you don't do when you're writing it, and hearing it, the emotion hits you in a different way. Sitting in a city park in New Orleans with Danelle telling me what it's like to be murdered, was one of the most intense things that happened, and it's still upsetting but also motivating in some sense that people need to know there's justice needs to be done. We need to know how to do it better in disaster next time.
Jon: We need to know how to do it better next time. Rebecca, thank you for talking to us.
[applause]
Rebecca: Thank you so much for coming.
Jon: Thanks to everyone who came.
[music]
Louise: ALOUD Audio is presented by the Library Foundation of Los Angeles and made possible through support provided by The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, the Annenberg Foundation, City National Bank, contributors to The Stay Home and Read a Book Ball, and Donna and Martin J Wolf. Media support provided by KUSC 91.5 FM and KCET. ALOUD theme composed by Larry [unintelligible 01:05:45].
[music]
[01:06:00] [END OF AUDIO]