

Glimpses of a better world:

The role of tangata whenua, community & voluntary sector in the Canterbury earthquake recovery

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"At 5:12 in the morning on April 18, 1906, about a minute of seismic shaking tore up San Francisco, toppling buildings, particularly those on landfill and swampy ground, cracking and shifting others, collapsing chimneys, breaking water mains and gas lines, twisting streetcar tracks, even tipping headstones in the cemeteries. It was a major earthquake, centered right off the coast of the peninsular city, and the damage it did was considerable. Afterward came the fires, both those caused by broken gas mains and chimneys and those caused and augmented by the misguided policy of trying to blast firebreaks ahead of the flames and preventing citizens from firefighting in their own homes and neighborhoods. The way the authorities handled the fires was a major reason why so much of the city — nearly five square miles, more than twenty-eight thousand structures — was incinerated in one of history's biggest urban infernos before aerial warfare. Nearly every municipal building was destroyed, and so were many of the downtown businesses, along with mansions, slums, middle-class neighborhoods, the dense residential-commercial district of Chinatown, newspaper offices, and warehouses.

The response of the citizens is less familiar. Here is one. Mrs. Anna Amelia Holshouser, whom a local newspaper described as a "woman of middle age, buxom and comely," woke up on the floor of her bedroom on Sacramento Street, where the earthquake had thrown her. She took time to dress herself while the ground and her home were still shaking; in that era when getting dressed was no simple matter of throwing on clothes. "Powder, paint, jewelry, hair switch, all were on when I started my flight down one hundred twenty stairs to the street," she recalled. The house in western San Francisco was slightly damaged, her downtown place of business — she was a beautician and masseuse — was "a total wreck," and so she salvaged what she could and moved on with a friend, Mr. Paulson. They camped out in Union Square downtown until the fires came close and soldiers drove them onward. Like thousands of others, they ended up trudging with their bundles to Golden Gate Park, the thousand-acre park that runs all the way west to the Pacific Ocean. There they spread an old quilt "and lay down ... not to sleep, but to shiver with cold from fog and mist and watch the flames of the burning city, whose blaze shone far above the trees." On their third day in the park, she stitched together blankets, carpets, and

sheets to make a tent that sheltered twenty-two people, including thirteen children. And Holshouser started a tiny soup kitchen with one tin can to drink from and one pie plate to eat from. All over the city stoves were hauled out of damaged buildings — fire was forbidden indoors, since many standing homes had gas leaks or damaged flues or chimneys — or primitive stoves were built out of rubble, and people commenced to cook for each other, for strangers, for anyone in need. Her generosity was typical, even if her initiative was exceptional.

Holshouser got funds to buy eating utensils across the bay in Oakland. The kitchen began to grow, and she was soon feeding two to three hundred people a day, not a victim of the disaster but a victor over it and the hostess of a popular social center — her brothers' and sisters' keeper. Some visitors from Oakland liked her makeshift dining camp so well they put up a sign — "Palace Hotel" — naming it after the burned-out downtown luxury establishment that was reputedly once the largest hotel in the world. Humorous signs were common around the camps and street-side shelters. ... A menu chalked on the door of "Camp Necessity," a tiny shack, included the items "fleas eyes raw, 98¢, pickled eels, nails fried, 13¢, flies legs on toast, .09¢, crab's tongues, stewed," ending with "rain water fritters with umbrella sauce, \$9.10." ..., but the most famous inscription read, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may have to go to Oakland."

This extract comes from Rebecca Solnit's book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. Solnit's research on the sociology of disasters challenges us: *Why is it that in the aftermath of a disaster so many people suddenly become altruistic, resilient, resourceful, and brave, stirred and motivated by a newfound sense of community and purpose?* In short, offering glimpses of a better world.

The heroism of ordinary people is only part of Solnit's study. She also questions our tendency to assume that people will *not* act this way and the official responses that come out of this mistaken belief — a belief that cities wracked by disaster need to be protected from rampaging mobs, that government needs to suppress the panicked masses and save the day.

In fact, she concludes that widespread panic of a community in a disaster is a "vanishingly rare phenomenon," with cooperation and rational behavior more the norm. Typically, she finds that panic, when present, instead comes from the top — withholding and carefully managing the release of information, because of the fear that it will cause panic, but often with counterproductive consequences (such as the cordons that kept people from protecting their homes from the fires that decimated the city following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake).

The need to protect the community from itself is based on some flawed assumptions. First, official emergency responders are rarely the first people to respond to an emergency. Second, the central command-and-control model often misinterprets the reality on the ground. Third, the hero motif neglects the role of social capital, a soft-power variable that is played down in disaster management but which might actually help answer why some communities are more successful in their recovery than others.

One of the tribute songs written following the Canterbury earthquake includes the line “We are not heroes; we are a team”. In the aftermath of our quakes, who could be failed to be moved by so many people suddenly becoming altruistic, resilient, resourceful, and brave, stirred and motivated by a newfound sense of community and purpose. We have seen glimpses of a better world.

The Student Volunteer Army, the Fanny Army, and the Rangiora Express all made the nightly news, but equally stunning were the often unnoticed care workers on little more than minimum wage who came in to our rest homes on the afternoon of the quake whether it was their shift or not, even when their own homes were in shambles or about to be red-stickered. Or those who without fuss made sure that each request for help posted on Volunteer Canterbury’s new Facebook site was answered before the end of every day. Or the volunteers from myriad organisations who just made sure that every house in the worst affected areas was door-knocked.

How can we maintain and build on that spirit of goodwill and altruism? How can we build a more resilient, resourceful, and inclusive community? Strong and resilient communities have often been found to be associated with a capacity: to grow wide leadership, to mobilize resources, to promote a spirit of generosity, and to enable active citizenship and participation.

When I first heard that list of ‘enablers’ of strong communities, it struck me that, at our best, that’s exactly what we as tangata whenua, community and voluntary organisations can be good at: growing wide leadership, mobilizing resources, promoting a spirit of generosity, and enabling active citizenship and participation. We have a particular role, I believe in offering living case studies of a better world.

I was involved in a major collaborative research project – the Study of the Non Profit Sector in New Zealand. It identified a few surprising facts about this sector. First, many were surprised to learn that we have as many as 97,000 of these organisations in the country (probably around 9,000 in Canterbury), engaging on a conservative estimate 200,000 full time equivalent paid staff and volunteers (probably almost 20,000 in Canterbury), and with a financial turnover of \$9.8 billion (probably almost

a billion dollars in Canterbury). This represents 1 in 10 of the New Zealand workforce, and is bigger than, for example, the manufacturing industry.

Including our country's million volunteers (1 in 3 of all New Zealanders 12 years or older), the sector's workforce is proportionately one of the biggest internationally – 25 per cent bigger than Australia's and 70 per cent bigger than the average of the 41 countries in an international study.

But what many found even more surprising, only 10 per cent of the sector in New Zealand employs paid staff – the other 90 per cent are all-volunteer organisations. And while it is often assumed that most are involved in providing health and social services and similar charitable activity, at least half of the paid and voluntary workforce of our sector is involved in what the international study, of which our New Zealand research was affiliated, called “expressive” organisations. This describes that part of our sector which is not just about service provision, but as much about citizen participation, not just about being funded for a service contract, but as much about fuelling social capital – weaving a sense of belonging among us and providing opportunities for citizen engagement.

Finally, what also surprised many, is how modest is the contribution government funding makes to our sector overall – especially when we make even notional calculations of the value of volunteers. It is likely to be higher than the 25 per cent of income able to be measured in this research, but is still likely to be less than what we raise from other sources and less than the contribution made by the Australian government or the average of the other 41 countries in the international comparisons. Over 2 million, or around 2 out of 3, New Zealanders 12 years and older donate money to our sector each year.

The recession both increased demand for support and reduced some avenues of fund-raising, and the earthquake has further increased some areas of need for support and destroyed many of our assets and facilities. I don't want anyone to think I am minimizing the very real losses and stress we have experienced. However, we have no shortage of the capacities that really matter – in fact many of them have ironically been replenished by the very impact of the earthquake on our communities. We now have even more opportunities to support the growth of widespread community leadership; to mobilize the communities' resources that really count, to draw on an enhanced spirit of generosity, and to enable channels for active citizenship and participation. We may have lost budgets and buildings, but we have all been enriched by this remarkable out pouring of altruism, resilience, resourcefulness, and sheer bravery, stirred and motivated by a newfound sense of community and purpose. What greater treasure could we be entrusted with?

Let's learn from the widespread, everyday heroic responses of our sector to the earthquakes – the greater levels of cooperation and working together for the common cause, just getting on with what needs to be done and being responsive to need, great flexibility and trust from the best funders and donors, clearing away the clutter that gets in the way, moving out to where people are (rather than expecting them to come to us), and focusing together around the communities and their assets and just sharing what we have. For one, I hope we never go back to lots of aspects of the 'old normal'. We have seen glimpses of a better world, and its made me ambitious for a better, fairer, more inclusive Canterbury

Just a few years before the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Oscar Wilde remarked that, "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always heading."

The mark of success of the recovery, for me, will be whether our vulnerable and disadvantaged neighbours are better off or worse off than before. Most of us who were doing ok before the earthquakes, despite the heartache and grief, will by-and-large turn out ok afterwards. But the disadvantaged are too often left out of the decision-making processes, and the gap between the haves and the have-nots can easily widen following a disaster. Let's not settle for anything less than a fairer, more inclusive city than before the earthquakes. Otherwise the disruption, the pain, the destruction, the grief, and the terrible loss of 183 lives will have been in vain.

And we have a special responsibility for this as tangata whenua, community and voluntary organisations. Because whatever other roles we have, I believe we also have a role as community 'carriers of hope'. For me, hope has two important components. First, it requires a dissatisfaction with how things are (otherwise it lapses into complacency or apathy). Secondly, it requires that brave belief that we can make a difference (otherwise its fatalism).

That's what it means to have glimpsed a better world and not be willing to settle for anything less.

Jackie Sanders, Mike O'Brien, Margaret Tennant, S Wojciech Sokolowski & Lester M Salamon (2008). *The New Zealand Non-Profit Sector in Comparative Perspective*, Office for the Community & Voluntary Sector/Committee for the Study of the New Zealand Non-Profit Sector: Wellington.

Rebecca Solnit (2009). *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*, Viking: New York.