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Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality, by Douglas Sturm (book review)

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BOOK REVIEW

SOLIDARITY AND SUFFERING: TOWARD A POLITICS OF RELATIONALITY. By Douglas Sturm. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998. Pp. 335. \$65.50. ISBN: 0791438694. Paper. \$21.95. ISBN: 0791438708.

Writing about something of Doug Sturm's is immediately a relational undertaking. Before the first word is typed, Doug is ensconced in my imagination up in the back row, ready to ask the first question, as he was the first time I met him at a Symposium on Law, Religion and Ethics at Hamline Law School. He finds the fulcrum point of the most interesting paradox in your presentation, and balancing on it like one of those clowns on a unicycle, he proceeds to set first one, then two, then three . . . ideas spinning. Then he asks a question out of the midst of his piercingly clear spirals, smiling and eager for the nourishment of genuine interaction. With such a formidable presence in my internal textual audience, how can I begin? Yet how can I resist?

I will try both clarity and a backspin: Douglas Sturm in this latest book reveals himself as almost predictable. Who among his readers has not known he was a socialist, a feminist, a well-rounded, intellectually acute, politically active, spiritual troublemaker? Here he is again in the guise of the knowledgeable scholar forever moving to include more: more spirit, more people, more difference, more tension, more justice, and now more rocks and trees. His movement of inclusion draws the reader always outside the framework of the conventions of discourse he last inhabited. Yet something about that movement itself has an integral, almost definable theme, a theme of relation and connection permeating the incisive distinctions his fine mind navigates for us. For example, if we look back to *Community and Alienation*,¹ his rich essays on process thought and public life published in 1988, we find the usual suspects. Chapter three, entitled "Identifying Problems of Public Order," carries that book's subtext in its chapter subtitle: "A Relational Approach."² Sprinkled throughout that earlier

1. Douglas Sturm, *Community and Alienation: Essays on Process Thought and Public Life* (U Notre Dame Press, 1988).

2. Id at 52.

book are Whitehead and process thought, and the tell-tale doctrine of internal relations. For Sturm, relations are always internal to their terms, always unalienated, always connected to the real stuff of each person connected in the cosmos, and the cosmos is one of love so trenchant that Sturm uses its name with wise parsimony and undeniable grace. *Community and Alienation* is an invitation to a public order of covenant, inclusion, and prophetic naming of public ills. It is woven of rich reflection, considerable authorial verve, comprehensive scholarly learning, engagement with the most recent writings of peers. So, what has changed?

Once again, in this newest tome, *Solidarity and Suffering*, Sturm is sensitive to the feminine insights of contemporary women scholars. He is again solicitous of the social nature of the individual. He is again versed in the most recent as well as classical religious and political texts. He plays on our interconnections, conceives of us as engaged in a communal activity of polity-weaving, and brings the resonance of the spirit to the fore in the dialogue into which he enters with zest. No one is excluded, in conception or voice, for long. But these things have always been true of Douglas Sturm's writing.

There are changes, if subtle ones, beyond his inclusion of the non-human figures of creation, an intensified ecological relationality. In addition to an ever-widening sense of the threads among all created beings, I suggest that in this text we find the tell-tale signs that Sturm is getting harder and softer in his old age. He is even more obnoxious about the extent of our aberrations, our human failings. He puts the faces and the statistics of the neglected children of the "two-thirds" world to the fore, centering his song on the suffering of innocents. He is without mercy for the reader, planting narrative and fact and numbers in the forefront of the text. But he has also begun to make even more manifest in his newest text, *Solidarity and Suffering*, the extent of the outrageous love and "interbeing" which points to redemption. He "outs" his familiar, favorite "philosophical doctrine of internal relations" and tells us it comes to this: "in the depth of our being, we belong to each other." (16)³

In any other academic text, "we belong to each other" in the "depth of our being" would risk falling into song lyric and nervous smiles. But Douglas Sturm has a lived testimony that reverberates

3. All citations in the text refer to the book under review.

among his peers, a life-text which supports such statements. This testimony was visible even in a several-day symposium peopled by a bank of male scholars; I recall such a gathering at DePaul University Law School in Chicago, where Douglas Sturm was the only speaker to use inclusive language, to invite women to share his text and the conversation openly. The meeting was on church and state, and the usual crew was there; Stanley Hauerwas' hour and a half without mentioning one woman was typical. Doug did not notice and then correct, he did not wait until the issue was named. He had from his first sentence, as a matter of exquisitely sensitive practice, modulated his vocabulary to demonstrate that he was structurally aware of the need to address and include Others. In the current book as in prior writing, Sturm weaves into the matrix of his text, the voices and writings of women, often pointing to them as sources of the great insight that only Outsiders may be relied upon to contribute. Thus it is hardly surprising that he includes in *Solidarity and Suffering* those creatures never seen at an academic conference rostrum: children. More, these are voiceless, dirty, ragged, sick children, the sort that tap an immediate instinct to deny and forget, lest we be driven crazy by our eternal complicity.

Sturm manifests our interrelatedness with these helpless suffering fellow humans; the corollary to his "we belong to each other" means that they are in us and we are in them . . . and that is good news. The abstract doctrine of that, the one that serves as a leitmotif through Sturm's writings, is the doctrine of internal relations. I remember being intrigued by the issue as an undergrad philosophy major, and writing a long, convoluted paper about why relations were internal to their terms, rather than external to them. I was rather startled when one of the other philosophy professors remarked that most of the "best" students of a visiting prof the year before (of which I was supposedly one) would come to the same conclusion. In that relentlessly secular program of philosophy, the Catholic visitor had slipped us a monism that made the internal nature of relations "obvious" to us . . . without ever mentioning God. But his view, like Sturm's, was so thorough goingly grounded in God's reality that no other cosmos was possible, even if the vehicle was Wittgenstein before the academy could admit that Wittgenstein used the "M" word (mystic). Wittgenstein, too, thrums with internal relations. We belong to each other, we make each other in our talk, in our culture, in our language games, both

Wittgenstein and Sturm chant in the threads of their texts.

The virtuoso combination of such high abstraction and spirit, with gritty suffering and politics in a world of violence, simultaneously grounds Sturm's text and sends it winging. He composes a series of epigrams which punctuate the text into a manifesto-like exhortation, but they themselves are in process. Rather than modeling the didactic propositions of an imperative text, these musings contain the very process of ongoing thought and reflection that Sturm advocates: *[u]nderstanding in the absence of compassion is not only morally irresponsible; it results, as well, in a constricted, nay, a distorted form of understanding.* (224, emphasis in original)

Refashioning the thought as it comes into writing, Sturm points the reader to the emphatic difference between mere constriction and distortion of the form itself. This is compassion, the necessary ingredient of understanding, transforming the very grammar of the sentence in which it is embedded, manifesting the generative process itself. Such movement is the hallmark of a true text, one so integral that an inexact word, recrafted, illustrates and then transcends its own limitations. Such textual dynamism is Sturm's *modus operandi*, both in conversation and in writing. Not satisfied with a sense of justice that would give some justice and food to the children whom he invokes at the outset, Sturm calls for a justice that "is expressive of a communal cosmology" and which "generates visions of a new social world." (160) Rather than attempting a social contractarian vision of mutual acceptability, of minimal self-binding to avert a life "nasty, brutish and short," Sturm imagines a movement, an animating spirit that would continue to give new birth to visions. His idea of justice is alive, as is his text.

The very vivacity of the text, the animation Sturm brings to writing, create a discourse that can sustain the considerable weight of suffering which he presents to the reader. He also conveys rather than merely pointing a theoretical finger at that most elusive virtue, hope, without which an account of suffering becomes an unredeemed authorial self-indulgence. I was reminded of William Stringfellow's contemplation of pain in the final pages of *The Politics of Spirituality*, written while he was dying painfully of multiple ailments.⁴ Stringfellow talks of mystery, and then locates pain in

4. William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality: Spirituality and the Christian Life* (Westminster Press, 1984).

intercession (he has already differentiated pain from punishment, freed it from guilt), and connects it to us all: “[p]ain is intercessory: one is never alone in pain but is always a surrogate of everyone else who hurts—which is categorically everybody.”⁵ Thus whether we are connected by the solidarity of our own suffering or by the solidarity of empathetic suffering, we are, in suffering, connected.

But is it better in some sense to be connected through compassion, rather than through the challenge of our personal suffering? Is deep empathy more trustworthy than the risky psychological terrain of our own wounds? This is, I suspect, a false dichotomy. Knowledge of our own internal landscape is a necessary face of our compassion for the Other. With his intense commitment to the public life, Sturm echoes Socrates’ valuation of the examined life—“From the time of birth to the time of death, the richness of our lives is contingent on the depth and extent of the dialogic interactions in which we have been engaged” (184)—but reveals, I suspect, a lingering male perspectival dominance. That is, he conceives of the dialogue as external, public, political. I would not assume that he might not count the kaffeeklatsch as a locus of dialogue, that he might not value the talk among traditional women as constitutive of community. Thus would not Sturm find of commensurate value with the Academy and its talk, the internal dialogue, the life of the introverted person (disproportionately female) who talks not to the outside Other, but to the internal figures in her reflective life? What woman does not have an introjected Patriarch all too available for silent conversation? Perhaps the sort of external dialogue in conventional “publics” to which Sturm refers is the luxury of the entitled. Socrates was a citizen, a male, a free man, in a state in which women, resident aliens, slaves, were all disenfranchised. Perhaps the call Sturm makes is best aimed at the privileged. It is not Doug Sturm’s doing that the readers of his books will be mostly the highly educated, Anglo, even disproportionately male, among all those making homes in the territory of the United States. Thus his call to acknowledge connection is peculiarly appropriate to those most likely to read it. This demonstrates his inherently subversive presence, even for those who do not know how he sits in the back of the room at conferences—listening, waiting, poised to ask the question that will move the talk into the next paradox, into the next space of mys-

5. *Id.* at 90.

tery, into the unresolved space of true conversation. We are much richer for knowing that he perches with full knowledge of the depth of suffering, with the very mechanism I name as not entirely validated in his book at work in him: always questioning—and interrogating Douglas Sturm most deeply of all. What a gift it is when he makes that movement of inquiry public, ranging among texts, asking us as readers how we know ourselves to be connected. And the font of his questioning, like the source of his writing, is so clearly one of love that it answers as it interrogates.

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