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Growing Where You Are Planted: A Review of Them

Abby M. Foreman

Dordt College, abby.foreman@dordt.edu

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Growing Where You Are Planted: A Review of Them

Abstract

"To live in community with people is to know that people and relationships are both sources of joy and great frustration."

Posting about a review of the book *Them* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/growing-where-you-are-planted-a-review-of-them/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, Them, hate, heal, Ben Sasse

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

in things

January 29, 2019

Growing Where You Are Planted: A Review of *Them*

Abby Foreman

Title: *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal*

Author: Ben Sasse

Publisher: St. Martin's Press

Publishing Date: October 16, 2018

Pages: 288 pages (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1250193681

Last year in this space I wrote an article, *Scrolling Alone*, about rising social isolation and alienation in our seemingly hyperconnected world. I cited the works of Putnam and others to support the case that something has shifted in our shared common life. Sasse, in his book on our current political and social divisiveness, also points to Putnam to highlight the decline in local community engagement as a significant problem. Sasse argues that as our local community connections weaken, we seek to find a sense of belonging in national level political and social tribes. These groups, according to Sasse, cannot bring the same sense of being known that can be found in the places in which we live. His diagnosis: “What is wrong is that we have let our habits corrode, and our affections warp. We have been willing to accept cheap, distant anti-tribes when, in reality, only hard-built tribes of blood, sweat, and tears can fulfill us” (130).

Throughout his book, Sasse uses academic studies, data, personal experiences, and stories to tell an engaging and ultimately convincing argument about the problems we are facing and the importance of intentional engagement in community. Sasse, a sitting Senator from Nebraska, is both humorous and straight-forward, and the book is enjoyable and easy to read. The book is really for anyone looking to understand why we are so divided and what we might do about it in our everyday practices and habits that

would shift the needle towards civility and active engagement with one another in our communities. Sasse uses his own upbringing in a community in Nebraska to help illustrate his points on building pride for and engagement in community. He does this skillfully, but it also leads to a question of universality for poor or urban communities. Many communities have historically been without resources and capital, and the local institutions that should have been fostering engagement have not functioned adequately. In these cases, the engagement that is needed may require greater systemic changes than would be needed in other communities where a decent infrastructure already exists. However, even with this critique, the message of the book to take seriously our responsibility to one another is universal—even if the particulars of how that plays out will not be the same from place to place.

Sasse identifies significant developments that have contributed to our growing loneliness and alienation from one another. He covers the basics of income inequality, lack of upward mobility and family breakdown as contributing factors. He also attributes increasing loneliness to the loss of work relationships as the nature of work becomes more mobile and certain jobs have either become more automated or will become more automated. The ability of people to fit within the new normal can lead to alienation and loss of a work community. The days of a worker remaining with a company for decades are over for the most part, and this has made the workplace more temporary, more transactional, and less relationally focused. Sasse also targets the rise of “politainment” on cable news and social media outlets that allows us to consume “news” and the outrage du jour tailored to our political perspective. Politics are framed in a good vs. evil context, which has led to increasing polarization and division. Compromising or nuanced positions are seen as weakness and a lack of commitment to principles. Similarly, Sasse is concerned as well about what he sees as the loss of free speech—especially on college campuses. If hearing and engaging with one another’s beliefs is seen as an attack on your own beliefs, then we have lost the ability to engage one another respectfully to achieve any sort of understanding of one another.

To live in community with people is to know that people and relationships are both sources of joy and great frustration. The final third of the book is structured as a “to-do list.” Sasse includes his prescriptions for how to heal, as promised by the title of the book. Sasse first recommends that we become Americans again, a people united together by shared American values and an idea: “The American idea is a commitment to the universal dignity of persons everywhere” (135). In addition to the original founders, Sasse includes Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. as founding fathers who fought for us to more fully recognize the American Idea that was certainly not realized through times of slavery and systemic racism. Admittedly, the American Idea is still not fully realized; and yet, it is not something that should be lost because of our failure to live up to it. Sasse writes, “The two indispensable insights of the American experiment

are inextricably linked: each and every individual is created with dignity—and therefore government, because it is not the source of our rights, is just a tool” (138). Sasse points out and agrees with the Calvinist view of the Founders that “human beings are fundamentally fallen, selfish, and inclined to let our passions run roughshod over our reason” (140). This informs his advocacy for a structurally conservative view of government in which the government is limited and restrains the excesses and abuse of power and authority. Sasse believes that the limited government gives space for local engagement and association in communities that should lead to flourishing if we all do our part. He urges the reader to put down her phone (and to have their families do the same) and to intentionally engage in the place she lives. With a reference to Ecclesiastes, Sasse argues: “The wise man learns how to grow where he is planted. He chooses joy. He embraces the time and season, these people and this place” (215).

The unexpected aspect of the book was not intentional: Sasse, in his approach and application of what he has learned, models the practice of developing disciplines of intentional habits for life in the current age. He and his family seem to have an approach to life that promotes curiosity, learning together, discernment and application in how they live their lives. As an example, in addition to limiting screen time as many families do, his family has also instituted a time of Sabbath from screens for a time on Sunday to unplug completely. As part of finding their way as a family in the age of the smartphone, they read the research on the harmful effects of unlimited connectedness and screen time and had their older children do so as well. Inviting their children to read and see for themselves why they should limit and be discerning about their online connectedness strikes me as a wise way to model good discipline and habit building in life.

This type of approach promotes wisdom and thoughtful restraint in our reactions and actions. Developing wise habits and discipline is much healthier than living a life of reaction and outrage directed towards “them.” Sasse urges that we resist joining anti-identities, tribes that thrive on outrage and the caricature of “them.” Instead, if we know what we are for, and we have developed a life full of individual and communal habits that are integral to our identity (for the believer, this would be our lives as disciples), then we can help to put the outrage-mongers out of business. We can resist the temptation to reduce other human beings to one aspect of who they are (or who we think they are) and instead recognize their inherent dignity as image bearers of God. In *Uncommon Decency*,¹ Richard Mouw says that reducing people to this or that label is bearing false witness regarding them; it uncharitably denies the fullness of who they are, and it is theft—stealing God-given dignity from them in the ways that we diminish and scorn (Mouw 46).

As we become even more mobile and less tied to place and community, Sasse asks intriguing questions: “Do you know where you’ll be buried? Where will you buy a

cemetery plot?” In asking these questions, he is really asking: where is your place, your home, your community? Where will you invest? It may not be the place where generations of your family have lived, but Sasse argues that we all have a responsibility to engage and invest in the community we’re in. Sasse, with his characteristic dry wit, puts it this way: “People everywhere are annoying. Community is hard. So what? Commit anyway, and act as if your body is going to end up in the place where you are. Eventually, you’ll be right” (217). He concludes by saying that Americans should unite first and foremost to the shared value of universal dignity for all people. We should recognize also that we are all created as social beings, and we are meant to be rooted—“we’re meant to be together, pursuing goals and dreams in common” (253). This togetherness expressed through civil society associations and institutions that help to bring people together are worthy of our fighting. “It’s the habits of heart and mind that make us neighbors and friends. At the end of the day, it’s love. And when a bunch of “them” are joined by love, and by purpose, “they” can become “we” (253).

FOOTNOTES

1. Mouw, Richard. *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, (2nd ed.). IVP Books, 2010.