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Tribute to Professor William ("Bill") Stuntz

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Tribute to Professor William ("Bill") Stuntz*

JULY 3, 1958 – MARCH 15, 2011

Many knew Professor Stuntz as a wonderful scholar and teacher, but even more knew him as a gracious and humble Christian. Many great reflections on his life and work exist across the Internet, and although my own reflections on Professor Stuntz are a mere drop in an ocean of admiration and respect, I share them here.

I enrolled at Harvard Law School in 2001 just after Professor Stuntz arrived in 2000. Having little interest in criminal law, his subject of expertise, I never encountered him in the classroom. I met Professor Stuntz when he spoke to the law school's Christian Fellowship group one evening, something he would do on occasion each semester. Excited and awed both that a Harvard Law Professor was a Christian and I was to hear him speak, I remember anticipating a deep discussion full of big words and complicated subjects. Instead, he started off self-deprecatingly by pointing out that he was no one special, just a typical "nerdy" law professor. He proceeded to tell us how important we were, how important *our* meetings were, and how important was the subject matter on which our student group focused. No Latin phrases or showy, polysyllabic words saturated the talk, and references to himself or his views were minimal. Thus was my introduction to his humility and graciousness. Only recently I learned that his practice of humility had an early start. At the memorial service, Professor Stuntz's brother (Dave Stuntz) mentioned that even as a child, little Bill Stuntz realized that he was "smarter" than most people. Dave said that his brother therefore cultivated "a remarkable, gentle humility and affirmation of others" so that he could use his intellect to build others up rather than hurt or taunt them.

* Written by Lucas Osborn, professor, Campbell Law School. The Campbell Law Review pays tribute to the life of Professor Stuntz, a great Christian, scholar, teacher, and man. The contributors to this Law Review volume, which considers the relationship between liberalism and Christianity, met at Campbell Law School to discuss their ideas on Friday, March 18, 2011, just three days after Professor Stuntz passed away. Because many of the conference participants knew (or certainly knew of) Professor Stuntz, we paid tribute to him at the conference, and do so again here.

Because his office door remained open so often (something uncharacteristic of many law professors), I got to know him better as I not infrequently stopped in to speak with him. Soon I learned we had something somewhat in common – we both had lower back pain. I say “somewhat” in common because of the vast disparity in the intensity of that pain. I had torn two discs in my lower back just before law school, which resulted in nagging pain if I sat for too long. With a little ibuprofen and a change of position, I was basically back to normal. Professor Stuntz’s pain was much more serious. His pain forced him into a reclineable wheel chair for much of the time and required him to take strong pain medicines. A couple of things stand out to me about my repeated visits to Professor Stuntz’s office: First, he never seemed bothered or impatient (something I admire all the more as a relatively new law professor), but rather seemed genuinely glad to see me. Second, somehow it always seemed that during my visits the conversation drifted toward me – what I was doing, what I was thinking, and how my back felt. Only later did I realize how much his focus on others was an intentional and God-inspired discipline.

Professor Stuntz often talked about his severe back pain in the context of his Christian faith. Just as his graceful discussions of his illness with cancer would eventually do, his thoughtful and personal conversations about his life with pain allowed many to understand what a Christian-centered world view looked like. Several highlights remain with me: He did not ask “why is this happening to me?”, because he understood that pain and illness are part of the common human condition (relating to what Christians call a “fallen world”). To ask “why me?” is to imply that I am deserving of something better than that which is common to all humans. Professor Stuntz therefore did not ask “why”, and often noted that he had won his “share of life’s lotteries” anyway. In addition, he understood that pain is not a good thing in itself – we are all meant for something different in the long run. He spoke passionately about how his pain made him desire that “something different,” which Christians call heaven. He said even though pain was the last thing he thought about before finally drifting uncomfortably into sleep and the first thing he thought about when he woke up, he would not, if given the chance, trade his newfound desire for heaven for the removal of the pain. I marveled (and still marvel) at such a Godly perspective.

In the spring of 2004, Professor Stuntz won the Sacks-Freund Teaching award, an award for teaching excellence voted on by the graduating law students. At graduation, I had the honor of introducing him for the award. As I said then, I did not have the pleasure having

2011]

TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR WILLIAM STUNTZ

697

Professor Stuntz teach me how to prepare for a criminal law exam. But he taught me far more important lessons that prepared me for my life exam. For those lessons and for his friendship, I am deeply thankful.