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A holistic healer

How should one portray a complex, multifaceted person like Solly in a short piece for a 'Festschrift'? From our 30 years of acquaintance with Solly, we would characterise him above all as a quintessential scholar: an up-to-date, experienced, thorough medical practitioner and respected university administrator. This is not our field. His impact, however, goes far beyond academic specialisation.

Solly transcends all the usual disciplinary boundaries through his wide reading on social justice and interrelated global health issues. Not many South African doctors can discuss political intricacies with the depth of his knowledge – hence the inevitable switch to cricket or rugby. During lunches with Solly and Evie, by contrast, we are always certain to engage in more relevant conversations.

Solly's intermittent teaching at the University of Toronto has allowed him to cultivate an ever-widening worldwide network of colleagues. Keeping up with his substantial body of publications is a challenge. When we debate controversial and sensitive issues in our own social science fields, we frequently find ourselves conceding his points. The evidence he articulates is always derived from a principled ethical position, without his ever being dogmatic. Solly cherishes ambiguity and distrusts conventional wisdom. He is outspoken without moralising, eschews purity and questions the conformity pressures of fashionable 'wokeness'.

We would have loved to have been flies on the wall, listening in on what must surely be fascinating conversations between the retired father and his son David. A professor of philosophy at UCT, admired by the liberal faction of a divided campus, he now acts as something of a thorn in the side of a complacent administration. The son carries the name 'Benatar' as an appealing legacy – a brand, a brave flag for the forgotten enlightenment rationality and the logic of justice and equal human rights. In this vein, the Benatar mindset endures in a country that needs such spiritual sustenance now more than ever.

In their lifestyle, Solly and Evie demonstrate exemplary modesty. They go against the grain of high-flying consumerism among both old and new elites. Solly finds time to nurture friendships. We know of many acquaintances who turn to him when they need medical advice, and he obliges willingly as an interpreter of complex medical diagnoses. Our own daughters, Kanya and Maya, have benefited greatly from his prudent counsel on career choices and at different points in their lives.

We have seen Solly carry his own health challenges without self-pity or hypochondria. He serves both the rich and downtrodden as an informed healer, without recourse to mysticism. Perhaps it is also his Jewish heritage, with its emphasis on mutual care within a historically vulnerable community, that motivates such virtues. As outsiders, but global citizens like Solly, we are forever thankful for such a friend. To have accomplished all these virtues by this milestone birthday is a feat indeed and we wish him the very best in the decades ahead.

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