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Emotional Storm

Michael Eigen
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The title refers to psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's words: "When two personalities meet, an emotional storm is created." This goes beyond Freud, whose psychology focused on the intrapsychic rather than the interpersonal. The author, a psychoanalyst and New York University professor, is a well-read and gifted writer who has authored eleven books, including *Ecstasy* and *The Sensitive Self*, and written for numerous psychotherapy journals.

His phrasing is memorable: "the tightrope of peace is uneasily strung between tendencies to stifle or explode." These two poles represent crippled responses to emotional storms. This book helps readers break through deadness without bursting, to broaden and deepen contact and empathy with others. Eigen sees people dodging storms or analyzing them, walking around with emotional umbrellas rather than feeling the rain.

Every new baby rains a mixture of joy and trouble. "There are those who shut a baby up with adoration … Control becomes important as an ordering principle where responsiveness fails." Eigen zooms in on the swaddled, pacified baby to reveal the storm, the power that upsets, and ultimately rewards real engagement. He shows how compassion can be hijacked by politics or straitjacketed by theological pontification. "The will to power must have its say, not its way. It commands no more than a vote in psychic democracy. It is part of a larger emotional storm that people need to navigate." He wants people to develop a taste for storms.

Eigen offers case histories and personal revelations, including his own suicidal feelings and fears of failure. He reads widely in religion, poetry, and philosophy. At times, his prose is acute, adamant, aphoristic; at other times it tumbles out obtusely, almost a stream of consciousness. "Impact" works better as a noun than as a verb; he uses it both ways, to its own detriment. He is contagiously exuberant, exasperated, hopeful. He crystallizes brilliant metaphors, like the "binocular psyche." With two cerebral hemispheres, human beings integrate experiential duality as they do their binocular vision. The author rages against human destructiveness, exalts life and its ethical demands, accepts ambivalence (we love and hate our children), and welcomes the storms of meeting, growing, even dying affirmatively.

A chapter is devoted to the great, puzzling drama of Abraham and Isaac, in which God orders a father to kill his own son. The story moves from ugliness to glory, but Eigen prefers uncertain aliveness to facile faith. His message is timely now when politicians tout a culture of life, emphasizing embryonic and vegetative forms because they are most vulnerable. These kernels of potential or exhausted life, devoid of personality and unable to speak for themselves, evoke storms from outsiders with agendas and creeds to protect and advance. Eigen's book is for readers who are willing to engage other wills, to storm the ramparts of apathy, prejudice, and self-protection, to come alive in a democratic universe of real personalities.
E. JAMES LIEBERMAN (August 18, 2009)

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