Teachings of Dr. Oliver Sacks

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Oliver Sacks (1933–2015) was dubbed by the *New York Times* as “the poet laureate of medicine.” His many years as a neurologist brought him into close contact with many human beings with severe disorders—and he seemed to learn from each of them. To him, they were not “cases” but real people, human beings whose lives had been seriously impaired, who needed care, who still had something to teach. His many books reached millions of readers and opened new and deep worlds to us.

Dr. Sacks was raised in a fairly observant Orthodox Jewish family in Cricklewood, England. Although later in life he reminisced about the positive elements in his religious upbringing, by the time he was a teenager he was already drifting away from the religious lifestyle of his family. At some point he admitted to his father that he had homosexual tendencies, “but don't tell Ma, she won’t be able to take it.” But his father, a medical doctor, did tell his mother, also a medical doctor, that their son was homosexually inclined. The next morning his mother “came down with a look of horror on her face, and shrieked at me: ‘You are an abomination. I wish you had never been born’” (*Gratitude*, pp. 37–38). Although the subject seems never to have come up again with his parents, the searing pain of his mother’s remark never went away.

After becoming a doctor in 1960, Sacks left his family and community, in search of a new setting for his life. He moved to Los Angeles where he continued his studies in neurology. Feeling an inner void, he turned to drugs and a near-suicidal addiction to amphetamines. He slowly recovered, and then found meaningful work in New York in a chronic care hospital in the Bronx, the Mount Carmel. “I was fascinated by my patients there, cared for them deeply, and felt something of a mission to tell their stories—stories of situations virtually unknown, almost unimaginable, to the general public and, indeed, to many of my colleagues” (*Ibid*., p. 39).

Throughout his life, Sacks dealt with loneliness, feelings of not belonging. He had a variety of neurological problems of his own, and then later in life had to deal with injuries, and eventually with bouts of cancer. Perhaps because he had these issues, he was able to view life with deeper insight and intensity, greater empathy for sufferers, gratitude for all the genuine blessings he did enjoy.

An underlying theme of his work was expressed simply and elegantly: “The essential thing is feeling *at home* in the world, knowing in the depths of one’s being that one has a real place in the home of the world” (*Awakenings*, p. 272). As we go through life, we need to feel that we are rooted in

something real and strong, that we can live without fear and despair. But this is not easy to achieve.

> For all of us have a basic, intuitive feeling that once we *were* whole and well; at ease, at peace, at home in the world; totally united with the grounds of our being; and that then we lost this primal, happy, innocent state, and fell into our present sickness and suffering. We had something of infinite beauty and preciousness—and we lost it; we spend our lives searching for what we have lost; and one day, perhaps, we will suddenly find it. And this will be the miracle, the millennium! (*Ibid*., p. 29)

In his book, *An Anthropologist from Mars*, he tells the story of Franco Magnani, a man who had only one subject and who talked about nothing else. It was the story of his hometown in Italy, Pontito. Magnani could imagine every building, every brick in every building; he could hear the sounds of the church bells. He painted scenes from Pontito with amazing accuracy and eye for detail. During World War II, the Germans had occupied Pontito, and Magnani's family had to escape. When they returned after the war, they found that things had changed for the worse. Buildings were defaced, the previously neat town was in shambles. Franco was a fatherless ten-year-old child at the time. He told his mother: "I shall make Pontito again for you, I shall create it again for you." When he later was living in the United States, he began to paint scenes of Pontito. His first painting was of the house where he was born, and he sent it to his mother. "In some sense he was redeeming his promise to reconstruct Pontito for her" (p. 167).

Oliver Sacks knew that Franco Magnani had an obsession; Franco felt himself the sole survivor and rememberer of a world forever gone. But Sacks then extrapolates from Franco's situation:

> Discontinuity and nostalgia are most profound if, in growing up, we leave or lose the place where we were born and spent our childhood, if we become expatriates or exiles, if the place, or the life, we were brought up in is changed beyond recognition or destroyed. All of us, finally, are exiles from the past. (p. 169)

But being an "exile" also has its positive elements. When one feels at least somewhat of an outsider, the very feelings of unease can generate creativity and originality. Confrontation fosters friction that can lead to boldness, confidence, independent thinking. "It takes a special energy, over and above one's creative potential, a special audacity or subversiveness, to strike out in a new direction once one is settled. It is a gamble as all creative projects must be, for the new direction may not turn out to be productive at all" (*The River of Consciousness*, pp. 139–140). People sometimes lock themselves into an intellectual box; they do not allow themselves "to encounter new ideas, to create a mental space, a category with potential connection—and then to bring these ideas into full and stable consciousness, to give them conceptual form, holding them in mind even if they contradict one's existing concepts, beliefs, or categories" (*Ibid*., p. 205).

Sacks had a "spaciousness of mind," a deep and spontaneous curiosity about how human beings function; how our minds and senses perceive reality; how each detail of nature deserves close and concerted attention.

> We take our senses for granted. We feel we are given the visual world, for example, complete with depth, color, movement, form and meaning all perfectly matched and synchronous. Given this seeming unity, it may not occur to us that there are many different elements composing a single visual scene, and that all of these have to be separately analyzed and then put together. (*Musicophilia*, p. 105)

As he was facing his own imminent death, Oliver Sacks wrote a beautiful essay drawing on his memories of the Jewish Sabbath as observed in the home of his youth, and in the homes of many of his relatives. The peace of Sabbath was palpable, a time outside time.

> And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life—achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest. (*Gratitude*, p. 45)

Dr. Oliver Sacks's mother had once wished that he had never been born. I suppose she changed her mind as she witnessed the impressive person he was to become and the significant achievements he was to attain. But those who have benefited from his care and his wisdom are very grateful that he was born. Our world is larger and better because of him.

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I first discovered Dr. Oliver Sacks when I read his book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, published in 1985. He wrote about a variety of people who had serious neurological deficiencies, and who dealt with problems that most people—thankfully—do not have to confront. Although the symptoms were so strange, Sacks writes about them with warmth and empathy; we come to focus on the human beings not on their symptoms. We all, after all, have deficiencies of one kind or another—or many deficiencies. Dr. Sacks's genius was not to judge us for what we lack, but for what we are.

Someone once told Dr. Sacks: "You've always been a rover. There are rovers, and there are settlers, but you're definitely a rover. You seem to have one strange adventure after another. I wonder if you will ever find your destination" (*A Leg to Stand On*, p. 66). I think that by the end of his life, Dr. Sacks had found his destination, calmly and wisely.

References

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