



Oliver Sacks 1933–2015

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On the morning of August 30, 2015, Oliver Sacks passed away in Greenwich Village, New York City, after his battle with cancer. Dr. Sacks, who earned his medical degree at Oxford University and practiced neurology in the United States, is perhaps best known for his published writings on interesting and often unique cases in neurology and cognition. Here are some reflections on Dr. Sacks' contributions.

Oliver Sacks, the pied piper of modern cognitive neurology, could bring a deeply comatose patient to literary life with his sweeping command of language. It seemed he did this effortlessly, and it always reflected well on the patients and their disturbed lives. Sacks mainstreamed the bizarre and forgotten and tried to demystify them for the rest of us. His storytelling abilities were second to none. Even as he was describing some syndrome well known to his colleagues, we all sat on the edge of our seats, listening to his version of human reality with its twists and turns and reflections on basic humanity. He was a master.

It was on an all-night flight to Rome from New York in 1991 when I spotted Sacks sitting up, alert, with his light on in the otherwise darkened cabin. His food tray was down and placed on it were copies of his various books. I figured he was on a book tour and girding himself for the hoopla awaiting him at the other end. There were other notables on the flight, including the Nobel Laureate Gerald Edelman. It turns out we were all headed to the same Vatican meeting, where we were to gather together to listen to worries about the human mind. After we arrived at Leonardo da Vinci Airport and had passed through customs, I looked around for rides to the hotel only to discover that Sacks had already been whisked away by a Vatican driver. It was clear that the Church knew he was something special.

Everything about Sacks was both special and quirky. He did things his way. As he started his talk at the Vatican, he took a deep breath and paused for a moment. Then he said he just had a thought, an idea, and he was going to give a different talk than the one he had originally proposed. The crowd gasped at the nerve and the energy of such a thing. The invariably over-prepared scientists present were frozen with awe, as in "how the hell do you do that?" Sacks then settled into a magnificent story, a tale about his patient who had revealed a truth about life: sometimes the cure of an ailment is worse than the disease. Metaphor upon metaphor was being piled on right there where the Synod of the Bishops also meet.

It turned out the story was one he had told before and he had it well-honed, which was a great relief for the rest of us! But it was Sacks at his best, quickly reacting to the scene that prompted a change in his message: adaptive, energetic and smart all the way. The Vatican

swooned, Edelman and Sacks became great friends, and we all had seen the master at work.

Sacks' contribution to the public's understanding of brain and mind are now legendary. His fixation on seeing the world from the patient's point of view, the bit of 'self' patients might have purring in them even though their ability to express themselves is disturbed, is, for me, his biggest triumph. As we learned from his own autobiography, introverted and deeply introspective, although taking great pleasure in being in the company of friends, he struggled for decades by not allowing his own sexual identity to publically emerge. This struggle suggests that he knew the main lesson of medicine, the meaning of suffering. Like Philip in Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, learning about and appreciating suffering is the first step in becoming a great physician, and Sacks' writings captured it with Maugham's skill.

As he was lying on his death bed, with cancer chasing him down his last road, Sacks wrote a piece entitled "Urge" for the *New York Review of Books* that summarizes one of the conundrums of our modern society. In our modern world of neuroscience, with all of its mechanistic details revealing causes for all kinds of behaviors, how can we hold some people responsible for their crimes? This topic has captured the imagination of scholars, scientists, lawyers and jurists, and programs that consider the problem have popped up everywhere. Brain scans, demographic data, discussions of the nature of retribution and more are being examined for their relevance to the law.

Oliver Sacks captured all of this in his last essay with one of his telling neurological stories. It is the saga of how a patient contracts a head injury as a teenager that evolves into epilepsy, then temporal lobe surgery, followed by the appearance of bizarre behaviors, including hypersexuality. This ultimately leads to the downloading of child pornography, to discovery and arrest by the FBI, and to time in prison. He survives all of that because of the efforts of many supporters, including Sacks. The man is now under medical control of his urges and has been home for a few years. Neuroscientific research informed the court and, in part through Sacks' persuasive arguments, influenced sentencing and understanding of the problem.

Sacks saw the man and heard the joyous news that all was good with him and his family and his community. As he told Sacks, "I am in a good place." I certainly hope Sacks is too. He knew how suffering with a mental illness or neurological disease can isolate people, as those without mental illness find the symptoms too bizarre or off-putting. Sacks always understood both perspectives and recognized that educating the public about brain disorders through his stories was important. No one ever did it better.

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