OLIVER SACKS

An Obsessional Investigator,
Explorer of Neurological Oddity,
a Rover Always on the Move

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PRELUDE

My formal introduction to Oliver Sacks occurred by telephone this past May. Adrienne Baach called me at work and graciously delivered my Quest paper topic. She was quite enthused. "I have almost all of his significant works," she said, kindly volunteering any title I might not have in my possession.

In my study at Plymouth Church, I'm surrounded by a rather extensive collection of books, so many more than dusty theological tomes. Near also, more publicly accessible, there is a church library I often frequent. Venture to my home you'll find additional shelves that display titles I treasure for one reason or another. Prior to Adrienne's call, nothing of Oliver Sacks was to be found in any of my life's compartments. The Quest assignment has thus pushed me into new endeavor: the strange tales, the roving curiosities of Oliver Sacks.

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In 1974 Sacks wrote a book entitled, *A Leg to Stand*, which was a reflection upon a personal injury, his own strange experience with a phantom limb. He had gone off to hike a Norwegian mountain. At the base of the mountain he noticed a sign that issued warning: "Beware of the Bull", along with a cartoon illustration of a bull tossing a man. Sacks thought this an expression

of Norwegian humor until later, well into the heights of his hike, he encountered the forewarned creature. (*On the Move*, p. 214)

Meeting the bull did not fare well for Sacks; sprinting to escape, he tore his left quadriceps, which required surgery and hospitalization. While convalescing, he was visited by his Auntie Len, a family favorite, who offered this assessment of her nephew:

> "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.'

Oliver Sacks. By his own account he was an obsessional investigator; an explorer of neurological oddity, a rover always on the move, who could not help but write on his strange adventures and experiences. For a time he aspired to be a researcher, but he was ill-suited for laboratory work, and somewhat clumsy. One of his supervisors advised: "Sacks, you're a menace in the lab. Why don't you go and visit patients. You'll do less harm."

Sacks once compiled a list of topics he had written about, and the following were mentioned: aging, amnesia, color, deafness, dreams, ferns, Freud, hallucinations, neural Darwinism, phantom limbs, photography, pre-Columbian history, swimming, twins. (New York Times, Obituary for Sacks, Aug. 31, 2015). To this partial list we can add: music, motorcycles, weight lifting, volcanoes, jellyfish, gravitational waves, and the elements of the periodic table. Almost

always, threaded within and throughout this broad range of subject matter, were patients, the people Sacks was drawn to understand.

Sacks was the author of numerous bestselling books that have been translated into over 25 languages. His writing has been adapted into film, stage, and opera productions. He regularly contributed to The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, and the London Review of Books. A prolific journal-keeper, he accumulated more than 600 personal journals. He was profuse in his use of annotated footnotes, causing one frustrated editor to comment: "Oliver! You'd do anything for a footnote." (*On the Move*, p. 240) He was profuse also in his use of adjectives. "I never use one adjective if six seem to me better and, in their cumulative effect, move incisive," he once said. (*On the Move*, p. 190). Terse he was not. Sacks was a voluminous, prodigious writer.

Sacks' received over a dozen honorary doctorates in his lifetime. The New York Times titled him, "poet laureate of contemporary medicine." The Independent of London called him "the presiding genius of neurological drama." One reviewer extolled Sacks as "a Copernicus of the mind and a Dante of medicine who turned the case study into a poetic form." (Maria Popova, "Oliver Sacks on Gratitude")

Columbia University created a position specifically for Sacks, that of "Columbia Artist", giving him unfettered access, roving privileges we might say, to the university's various departments and disciplines. Queen Elizabeth bestowed the rare distinction in appointing him Commander

of the British Empire (CBE; 2008). He even had a minor planet named in his honor: 84928 Oliversacks (2003).

Oliver Sacks, the roving physician with an insatiable curiosity for exploring and writing about life, is the subject of my quest. In what follows I intend to highlight a few salient episodes from his early life; then briefly offer comment on four of his more popular works: *Awakenings; The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat; An Anthropologist Goes to Mars,* and *Musicophilia*. I'll conclude with a few summary thoughts on Sacks' spirituality, and the final writing in his life.

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A Household of Polymaths

Oliver Wolf Sacks was born on the 9th of July, 1933, in Cricklewood, a neighborhood in the northwest section of London, England. He was the youngest of four children born to Jewish parents. His father, originally from Lithuania, was a practicing physician. His mother, whose parents took flight from a rude Russia, was one of the first female anatomists and surgeons in England, and specialized in gynecology and obstetrics. (see Uncle Tungsten, p. 240). In his memoir, *Uncle Tungsten*, Sacks recalls:

> "…the thousand and one questions I asked as a child were seldom met by impatient or peremptory answers, but careful ones which enthralled me… I was encouraged from the start to interrogate, to investigate.
>
> (*Uncle Tungsten*, p. 9-10)

Oliver was nurtured in a family of polymaths, in a house full of music, science, and medicine. It was a nurturing environment where Oliver spent hours reading and "dreaming about numbers and chemistry and metals." (*Uncle Tungsten*, p. 34)

It was not an idyllic childhood. The Second World War imposed a huge interruption, an "exile" when Oliver, along with his brother Michael, were sent to school in the country (Braefield), to escape the Blitz. The headmaster, decent enough in London, became "unhinged" in the new setting. "He was vicious and sadistic, and beat many of us, with relish, almost daily," Sacks recalled later in life. This awfulness was magnified by a sense of having been "abandoned" by the family, of being "left to rot…as an inexplicable punishment for something we had done." *(Uncle Tungsten*, p. 20)

Sacks' parents provided piano lessons from an early age, and Oliver experienced the loss, due to death, of his first two piano teachers. Mr. Francesco Ticciati who instilled in Oliver a love for Bach that never dimmed, died in the war; he was replaced by Mrs. Silver, who died during labor in a delivery being tended by Oliver's mother. Oliver was so shaken by this that he couldn't touch a piano for a year. He eventually resumed his playing. But he never allowed for another piano teacher. (*Uncle Tungsten*, p. 184)

Two other life defining moments need be mentioned. A major upset occurred when Sacks' brother Michael was diagnosed as being psychotic at fifteen years of age. While the whole family was effected, Oliver was especially impacted. "I became terrified of him…of the

nightmare which was becoming reality for him." To fend off the fear, so as not to be swept into the chaos of Michael's madness, Oliver "kept a distance" by way of "absorption in the worlds of mineralogy and chemistry and physics, in science." (*Uncle Tungsten*, p. 186). He later commented: "A sense of shame, of stigma, of secrecy, entered our lives, compounding the actuality of Michael's condition." (*On the Move*, p. 61).

A second event occurred in 1951 when Oliver was 18 years of age, and still at home. In a father-son conversation, it came out that Oliver disclosed he had a preference for the company of boys. This was not met with a parental affirmation of "we love you no matter what." Oliver's mother was quite harsh in her reaction. "You are an abomination," she said. "I wish you had never been born." Those words, never forgotten, "haunted" Sacks for much of his life. (*On the Move*, p. 9-11).

Over the next few years Sacks followed in the steps of his parents and two oldest brothers, and prepared to practice medicine. He graduated from Oxford with a BA degree in physiology and biology; spent time on kibbutz in Israel (1955), completed medical school and had two hospital internships. And then, on his 27th birthday, he took leave of England. "I left," he said, "partly to get away from my tragic, hopeless, mismanaged brother (Michael). But perhaps, in another sense, it would become at attempt to explore schizophrenia and allied brain-mind disorders in my own patients and in my own way." *(On the Move*, p. 65).

Initially Sacks roved around in Canada (he wrote a piece on that brief phase of his life, "Canada: Pause, 1960"). Eventually he made his way to California, first to San Francisco, then Los

Angeles for a 3 year residency in neurology at UCLA. These were years when Sacks, after seeing patients during the week, would indulge his love of the motorcycle, don leather and chum with the Hells Angels; when he bulked up with serious Olympic style weight lifting, setting a California state record and earning the nickname: "Dr. Squat." (*On the Move*, p. 113). They were also years of drug addiction, when he was "in the thrall of amphetamines." (*On the Move*, p. 129).

The roving urge returned when the residency at UCLA was completed. Sacks had distinguished himself in his medical work, and had numerous job offers. But he felt the allure of New York City, and took a position with the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where he was offered an interdisciplinary fellowship in neuropathology and neurochemistry. He maintained an affiliation with the College of Medicine for four decades. But he also roved about in hospitals and nursing homes all over the city, from Staten Island to Brooklyn to Queens. He became a "peripatetic neurologist" whose love was "utterly literary." (*On the Move*, p. 223; see also the footnote, p. 137). When not engaged in the practice of medicine, he would frequent the New York Botanical Gardens, or go for a six hour swim around City Island, which was his residence for many years. (*On the Move*, p. 281)

Sacks spent more than fifty years as a resident alien in New York City. The city was a metropolitan laboratory affording him a position "at the heart of medicine." (On the Move, p. 222).

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A Sampling of Sacks

Awakening (1973)

In his book, *Awakenings*, Sacks chronicled his work with a group of patients, the "last survivors of forgotten epidemic" that raged for a decade or so in the aftermath of the first World War 1916-1927. (On the Move, p. 208) The illness, Encephalistus Lethargical – more commonly called the "sleeping sickness" – was a "Hydra with a thousand heads" that killed nearly 5 million people. Some few managed to survive and did so in a variety of strange, post-encephalitic states. Many were frozen in Parkinsonian like conditions, or were stuck in catatonic postures. All were locked in various bizarre states of suspension: of memory, perception, and consciousness.

Using a miracle drug, L-Dopa, Sacks treated these chronically ill patients, and then watched as they began to awaken, as if from a deep sleep. He more than watched. Sacks kept details notes and journals, and used tape recordings and film to document what was unfolding. This material formed the basis of the 20 case histories published in *Awakenings*, telling the stories, revealing the lives, of those who had been locked in a Rip Van Winkle like state of suspension.

One patient, 46 years old, was named Leonard L. Sacks described Leonard as "completely speechless and completely without voluntary motion except for minute movements of the right hand, with which he could spell out messages on a small letter board." Leonard had an "incredible degree of immobility and disability" prior to his being roused by the L-Dopa

therapy Sacks administered (Awakenings, p. 204). I mention Leonard L. because he was the character played by Robert De Niro in the1990 film adaptation of *Awakenings*. Robin Williams played Sacks. Their collaboration turned into a twenty five year friendship between actor and author. (*On the Move*, footnote, p. 307)

In reflecting upon *Awakenings* Sacks once commented:

> "Initially, there was some incredulity at the stories (I shared). And I had to agree with those who said they simply couldn't imagine such patients. Because God can only imagine such patients. But then God's imagination is what we call reality." (Hedy Weiss interview, Chicago Sun Times, 1982).

The various *Awakenings* recorded by Sacks' would not have been possible without Sack's sustained interest and commitment to his odd lot of patients. In reflecting upon his work with this group he said:

> "There can be no reaching out into the realm of the incommunicable (or the scarcely communicable) unless the physician becomes a fellow traveler, a fellow explorer, continually moving with his patients, discovering with them… Patients need proper diagnosis and treatment, but they also need understanding and care; they need human relationship and existential encounter, which can not be provided by any technology." (*Awakenings*, footnotes 104, 105, p. 225-226)

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The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat (1985)

An Anthropologist on Mars (1995)

In the late 1950's, while still a medical student in London, Sacks heard a lecture given by the Soviet physician, A. R. Luria, who pioneered the field of neuropsychology. Sacks later encountered the work and writing of Luria (*Human Brain and Psychological Processes*; *Mind of a Mnemonist*), and Oliver credited him with altering the focus and direction of his life. (*On the Move*, p. 178). Luria was "an exemplar" for Sacks, stirring his keen interest in combining science and storytelling. Both used the genre of "case history" to practice what Luria called "romantic science." (*The Man Who Mistook*, Preface, p. ix)

The composition of "case histories", the combination of science and storytelling, forms the basis for two of Sacks best selling works: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for Hat*, and *An Anthropologist on Mars* ((1995).

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat was 26 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, and it rocketed Sacks to international fame. It consists of 24 case histories, clinical tales, of neurological patients. Sacks introduces us to The "Man" in the title, along with Witty Ticcy Ray, a young man afflicted by a Tourette's condition, complicated by facial tics "of extreme violence", whose rare moments of relief come mostly by way of drumming. We also meet the

"clumsy" Rebecca, rather grotesque in appearance, labeled as "motor moron", a "fool", a "mental cripple" until Sacks comes along, to see in her "unexpected, strangely moving, poetic power." Superficially, Rebecca was a "mass of handicaps and incapacities", but there was another deeper level where there was no sense of handicap, but a sense of "being alive, of being a soul, deep and high and equal to all others." (*The Man Who Mistook*, p. 176-180). This deeper level of being alive is also evident in the story of The Autist Artist, who was considered " ineduable, untreatable, and generally helpless" when first encountered by Sacks. Sacks uncovered in this patient the capacity to draw, to produce remarkable and detailed pictures. Many severe cases of autism result in people being "overlooked, unconsidered." Yet Sacks found the Autist Artist in possession of a gift that could contribute to the lives of others. (*The Man Who Mistook*, p. 214-232)

The "Man" in the title was Dr. P., a successful musician, an accomplished professional singer, and teacher in a School of Music. Dr. P. had perception issues: he couldn't recognize a face; or, he saw faces when there were no faces to be seen. He was known to pat the heads of parking meters or fire hydrants, thinking them the heads of children. He himself did not see his problem. But others readily observed his odd behavior. After one examination with Sacks, in preparing to depart, Dr P. grabbed his wife's head, thinking it was his hat. Sacks was startled. The wife took it in stride. He was afflicted, we eventually learn, with a tumor causing slow loss of visuality due to degeneration in the visual parts of his brain. (*The Man Who Mistook*, p. 18-19)

The publication of *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* is what caused a significant

spike in the mail Sacks received. People were curious, intrigued, as much by Sacks as for his patients. It is said he received about 10,000 letters a year. "I invariably reply," he once said, to people under 10, over 90 or in prison." (see NYT, the Gregory Cowles obituary, Aug. 30, 2015).

In *An Anthropologist on Mars* again turns to the case history, detailing "seven paradoxical tales." They are tales of "survival", people with neurological disorders, coping, adapting, as best they can to the conditions in which they find themselves. "Sickness," Sacks said, "implies a contraction of life." But "contractions" he notes, do not have to occur. Nearly all my patients, he observed, "reach out to life – not only despite their conditions, but often because of them." (*An Anthropologist*, Preface, p. xviii)

The one story I will mention from this work is that of Virgil. Sacks had received a phone call from a retired minister, whose daughter was betrothed to Virgil. Virgil was 50 when on the verge of matrimony. And legally, functionally blind. He had thick cataracts, a hereditary condition known as retinitis pigmentosa. The minister's daughter had hope that new developments in cataract surgery might restore Virgil's sight. She convinced Vigil to have surgery, and then proclaimed it a "miracle of sight restored" when Virgil did indeed, begin to see. But the joy surrounding the miracle did not last.

Virgil had four decades of neurological adjustment to no sight. He could see, but he had little frame of reference to process what was seen. And exposure to light, normal light, was painful and debilitating. He often experienced "a blinding glare." Virgil could see parts, but not

wholes. He could detect colors, but not always interpret shape. He could see letters and numbers, but often mixed them up. While he could see to walk and maneuver, he missed his cane and found the experience of ambulation with sight to be "scary" and "confusing." (*An Anthropologist*, p. 120) What was confusing for Virgil was not knowing whether to look or feel his way around.

Curiously, Virgil was a practicing masseuse at a Y. With surgery, he was able to see those people he was massaging for the first time, and he wasn't always thrilled at the sight. It was a relief when massaging for Virgil to shut his eyes.

Virgil's health took a catastrophic turn with he developed a lobar pneumonia, which landed him gravely sick, a "respiratory cripple", deprived of job, and independence. The miracle morphed into a calamity. (*An Anthropologist*, p. 151). The paradox - Virgil lost his sight a second time, a blindness he received as a gift. Finally, Sacks noted, Virgil was "allowed not to see." (*An Anthropologist*, p. 152)

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Musicophilia:

Tales of Music and the Brain (2007)

Oliver once said: "I've had music available every day of my life." Music entered his medical practice when he noticed the profound animating effect it had upon the Parkinsonian patients he

wrote about in *Awakenings*. Music triggered brain function, altered body movement, enlivened patients in astounding ways. So began Sack's interest in the neuroscience of music, which culminated in the publication of *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*.

Using the "case history" as his preferred form, Sacks explores a vast range of topics in *Musicophilia*, music and dreams and dementia, music therapy for the speech impaired (aphasia), and for those in depression. In the chapter, "Lamentations: Music and Depression", he speaks of his own depression that occurred after his mother died (1973). For weeks he would go to work and present a normal appearance, but inside he "was dead, as lifeless as a zombie." It was the music of Schubert "and only Schubert" that kept him alive. (*Musicophilia*, p. 298).

Musicophilia was condensed by PBS into a NOVA episode, Musical Minds (2009). It is available at the Allen County Public Library. I mention this for Sacks is included in the documentary as the subject in a clinical test to see if a scan of his brain can detect a different emotional response when listening to the music of Bach vs. Beethoven. It did. The brain scan clearly indicated Sacks' strong preference for Bach.

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Summary

Oliver Sacks possessed his share of contradictions in life. He once described himself as

"an old Jewish atheist", but he maintained a lifelong love of Bach masses. He was a man of science, a physician who never lost touch with his patients; yet he was writer, a poet, a "storyteller, for better or worse" in his own estimate. (*On the Move*, p. 384). He was single and celibate for most of his adult life, but then fell in love, his heart fluttered and sparks flew in an autumn romance shared with a partner. A physician for others, he kept a weekly appointment with his therapist. He was intensely shy in most ordinary social settings, attributable to a rare condition known as "prosopagnosia", which impaired his ability to recognize people. He addressed this subject in a book, *The Mind's Eye* (2010), in which he related stories of people visually disabled, yet coping, compensating with other heightened senses and abilities. Though diffident in disposition, he was public and revealing of himself in his writing.

Sacks was not religious in any theistic way. The chanting of his bar mitzvah brought an end to any formal Jewish practice (1946). Yet the framework of his life as a physician and as a writer was deeply informed by a profound spiritual outlook on life. He was animated by wonder and compassion, and felt "something of a mission" to tell the stories of his patients. He "bore witness" to the courage and tenacity of the suffering.

In his final years Sacks was as much a curiosity as the patients he wrote about. He assessed old age as a time to "explore whatever I wish, and to bind the thoughts and feelings of a lifetime together." He wrote a memoir when 80 years old, *On the Move*. And then he discovered that he had metastatic cancer. True to nature, he wrote about his disease and how it was effecting him. In an essay, "My Own Life," he reflected:

> "I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much, and I have given something in return…Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and then in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure."

In early August of 2015 the New York Times published a final Sacks reflection.
He wrote in part:

> "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 Sabbath, the day of rest…when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest."
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> (Sacks, "Sabbath", New York Times).

Less that a fortnight later, rest did come. Oliver Sacks died on August 30, 2015, completing his good and worthwhile and roving life.

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