William Vega

Reflections on the work of Oliver Sacks, presented as a part of the panel ***An Anthropologist from Mars*: Celebrating the Amazing Life and Work of Oliver Sacks** on October 9, 2015

If there's one thing Oliver Sacks' work has afforded me, it is perspective. I say this as a researcher, suddenly frightened at the prospect of what might come after the dissertation (can I even write the thing?). I also say it as a young man who on occasion yearns for the simplicity of adolescence, for a time when life's problems seemed to have simple answers, or at least be largely ignorable and without consequence. But the ground is shifting now—it has been for a while—and I can't pretend that my being here, as opposed to being at my home institution, isn't some childlike attempt to find some past version of myself that I can slip back into instead of facing life and its many changes.

Academic training seems to me to be a rather violent process of self-making, where a million versions of you get repeatedly broken and remade, each momentary and tailor-made to the exigencies of the task at hand. To name a few, I can recall "grad school application William," "First year-exam William," "Fieldwork proposal William (who was always on the edge of tears)," and the dreaded "Grant-writing William" who isolated himself and was very short of temper. All of this, I'm told by some, is simply part of the process of "finding your voice," which sounds to me like a cop out answer. But of course, this is not entirely off the mark, insofar as our primary mode of communication is the written word.

And if there is someone who can be said to have had a unique voice (and the added bonus of style), it was Oliver Sacks. His voice was direct, inquisitive, his style conversational (which is to say, approachable) and occasionally florid, but not without reason. In his memoir, Sacks writes: "I never use one adjective if six seem to me better and, in their cumulative effect, more incisive," a statement that makes me laugh because it goes against every piece of advice I have ever been given about the so-called "good writing." But it is also a statement that speaks to what made Sacks such a compelling figure and writer: his commitment and belief in his own voice, forged as it was in the shadow of disapproving professional colleagues. His voice became the conduit for complex ideas about the human mind and experience—ideas he delivered in clear and engaging prose that reached audiences outside the medical profession, where they were matters of living and not simply intellectual import. Of reactions to his work, Sacks once told an interviewer that he had received many responses from "people who had themselves experienced problems which I had written about… but which they had never before admitted to anyone else or even, sometimes, to themselves." Sacks' writing and generosity with ideas was a testament both to the power of listening and careful observation (qualities of a good doctor, to be sure).

Part of Sacks' unique style came from his ability to blend the particular to the general, something which included a careful consideration of his own life experiences, which were often themselves at the root of his intellectual questions. Late in his life, Sacks completely lost vision in his right eye. And while he admitted that this terrified him, he also wrote, somewhat hilariously that: "The perceptual consequences of my eye damage constituted a fertile ground of enquiry; I felt as if I were discovering a whole world of strange phenomena…" Sacks was an explorer in foreign lands, both those brought on by changes in his own embodiment and those experienced by his patients. But instead of positing incommensurability as a given, Sacks used his experiences and

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those of his patients to build bridges towards a greater understanding of what makes us each unique but nonetheless part of a whole. I consider him an anthropologist through and through.

Sacks' work has been profoundly formative for me as a person, especially at this particular stage in my life, where everything seems to be in flux and I wish for nothing more than stability. Throughout his 82 years, Oliver Sacks was many things: an Englishman, a "resident alien" (a status he clung to fondly), a man without a home country (a feeling I relate to especially in these moments), a swimmer, a body builder, and a failed medical researcher. These are past selves Sacks revisited in his memoir On the Move: A Life, a heartfelt recollection of missteps and insecurities: lost manuscripts, abandoned projects, professional revolutions, and personal failures in love. So perhaps the perspective I spoke of at the beginning of this talk boils down to this: Oliver Sacks has taught me to be kinder to myself, and to be sympathetic and forgiving, especially, to the past selves I either idealize or recall with painful regret; to not regard life as a linear accumulation of successes. To embrace and learn from the moments where it all falls apart. He spoke of detachment, not indifference. Of reflection. Of the need to stand outside ourselves, to train our eyes toward how things connect despite differences. In his writing, he gave us the hope that the pieces would ultimately fit together, not in some predestined way, but in a way that was unique to a particular life and gave meaning to its labors.

In his reflective mode—as in his memoir and personal essays—I found Sacks most moving and instructive. He was a man who didn't figure it out—whatever "it" is—until late in life. A man who spoke of "running out of luck" on two occasions: first in his forties when he broke his leg (which led to A Leg to Stand On) and again at 81, upon learning that he had terminal cancer, an event he summed up by writing, "my luck has run out." Instead of sinking into despair, he wrote of his imminent death: "I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude." He took stock of his life, of the sum of his life's work, and with grace pronounced the problems which had occupied his mind as "belong[ing] to the future," a future which he would not be a part of but which he nonetheless saw as being in good hands. The hands of my generation.

In reading Sacks' words, I was reminded of a woman with whom I worked for two years as part of my dissertation research on caregiving for the physically disabled. This woman is a quadriplegic and among the most severe cases I encountered throughout my research. And yet, I was surprised to learn that she rather enjoyed spending time alone. When I inquired about why this was—my attempt at tactfully asking how it was she could possibly *not* require… or want… around-the-clock care—she very plainly stated: "Because… I still have my head! I am not dead yet." Before I left Paris at the end of this past May, she asked me: "Tell me, what have you taken from this experience, from being here in Paris and doing this work?" It was a question I had often heard, but it had never carried such weight. Normally people wanted me to tell them how great it was to have lived in Paris, to have experienced French culture. But this time, the question was more pointed. What had I learned from working with people so different from me? From people whose lives are more than just culturally foreign. I thought long and hard about it and

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responded: “I am grateful. I have seen what bitterness looks like, how it destroys friendships and families. I have seen guilt. I have seen resilience, true resilience unlike ever before. And I have seen what it looks like to move forward, instead of spinning around in circles. And why it matters to move forward, no matter how little you move forward in the end.”

Oliver Sacks, one of life’s great teachers, granted me the gift of perspective. He also reminded me of the most important lesson I learned during my fieldwork: to not think I have it all figured out, and to be a student of life… that there are lessons to be gleaned from the lives of others if we only take the time to listen. And, most importantly, that the value of life has less to do with the givens (the world or mental architecture we share) and more to do with what we make of lives we are thrown into. That at the end of the day, we still have our heads—a lesson young people like myself, to whom the future has been entrusted, would be wise to remember.