In Memoriam: Oliver Sacks

It was paging through *Musicophilia* when I was first moved to write to Oliver Sacks. I was taken by his discussion of Sigmund Freud, who apparently disliked and avoided music. This was not what I’d heard. I’d grown up with tales of my mother’s piano teacher, who—before she escaped to Cuba with nothing but her music diploma sewn into her coat—had been a child prodigy in Vienna. As a youngster, she famously had played duets with Freud in the Viennese salons. Armed with this anecdote, I sat down to write a letter to Dr. Sacks.

A few weeks later, while walking down the streets of the Lower East Side, my cell phone rang, and it was Dr. Sacks himself. He was diffident, but earnest and inquisitive. He wanted to know everything about this story, and when the next edition of *Musicophilia* was published, there was my mother’s piano teacher with her very own footnote!

Dr. Sacks’ letters came typed, but with penned-in corrections that were clearly done with a fountain pen. He had just restarted piano lessons—after a 50-year gap—and had lots to say about his tussles with Bach. Over the years, he acted as a mentor and an inspiration—as he did for so many people. We were honored when he joined the Board of the *Bellevue Literary Review* to offer his support for writings that explore the human condition.

If there was ever truly a patron saint for the twinned worlds of literature and medicine, it was Oliver Sacks. It was not just his ever-thriving curiosity, his innate humanity, or his respect for even the most minute of details, but his patience with us—his readers—that was his greatest gift. He was an avuncular presence, taking us gently by the hand, leading us on his fabulous journey from neurons to ferns to hallucinations to minerals to gefilte fish to sign language. His generosity did not stop there, though, and he took us, ever so compassionately, on his journey toward death. The meditations he offered in his last year of life were gifts and guideposts for us—inquisitive, disarming, kind, wrenching. In one, he described minerals as “little emblems of eternity.” Dr. Sacks, you have become our little emblem of eternity.

Danielle Ofri

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