

Gratitude



Oliver Sacks

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About the Author

Foreword

IN THIS QUARTET OF ESSAYS, written in the last two years of his life, Oliver Sacks faces aging, illness, and death with remarkable grace and clarity. The first essay, “Mercury,” written in one sitting just days before his eightieth birthday in July 2013, celebrates the pleasures of old age—without dismissing the frailties of body and mind that may come with it.

Eighteen months later, shortly after completing a final draft of his memoir *On the Move*, Dr. Sacks learned that the rare form of melanoma in his eye, first diagnosed in 2005, had metastasized to his liver. There were very few treatment options for this particular type of cancer, and his physicians prognosticated that he might have as little as six months to live. Within days he had completed the essay “My Own Life,” in which he expressed his overwhelming feeling of appreciation for a life well lived. And yet he hesitated to publish this immediately: Was it premature? Did he want to go public with the news of his terminal illness? A month later, literally as he entered surgery for a treatment that would give him several extra months of active life, he asked to have the essay sent to *The New York Times*, where it was published the next day. The enormous and sympathetic reaction to “My Own Life” was immensely gratifying to him.

In May, June, and early July of 2015, he enjoyed relative good health—writing, swimming, playing piano, and traveling. He wrote several essays during this period, including “My Periodic Table,” in which he reflects on his lifelong love for the periodic table of the elements and on his own mortality.

By August, Dr. Sacks’ health was declining rapidly, but he devoted his last energies to writing. The final piece in this book, “Sabbath,” was particularly important to him, and he went over every word of the essay time and again, distilling it to its essence. It was published two weeks before his death on August 30, 2015.

—Kate Edgar and Bill Hayes

Mercury



surgical problems, none disabling, I feel glad to be alive —“I’m glad I’m not dead!” sometimes bursts out of me when the weather is perfect. (This is in contrast to a story I heard from a friend who, walking with Samuel Beckett in Paris on a perfect spring morning, said to him, “Doesn’t a day like this make you glad to be alive?” to which Beckett answered, “I wouldn’t go as far as that.”) I am grateful that I have experienced many things—some wonderful, some horrible—and that I have been able to write a dozen books, to receive innumerable letters from friends, colleagues, and readers, and to enjoy what Nathaniel Hawthorne called “an intercourse with the world.”

I am sorry I have wasted (and still waste) so much time; I am sorry to be as agonizingly shy at eighty as I was at twenty; I am sorry that I speak no languages but my mother tongue and that I have not traveled or experienced other cultures as widely as I should have done.

I feel I should be trying to complete my life, whatever “completing a life” means. Some of my patients in their nineties or hundreds say *nunc dimittis*—“I have had a full life, and now I am ready to go.” For some of them, this means going to heaven—it is always heaven rather than hell, though Samuel Johnson and James Boswell both quaked at the thought of going to hell and got furious with David Hume, who entertained no such beliefs. I have no belief in (or desire for) any postmortem existence, other than in the memories of friends and the hope that some of my books may still “speak” to people after my death.

W. H. Auden often told me he thought he would live to eighty and then “bugger off” (he lived only to sixty-seven). Though it is forty years since his death, I often dream of him, and of my parents and of former patients—all long gone but loved and important in my life.