



Gratitude

Oliver Sacks

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A deeply moving testimony and celebration of how to embrace life.

In January 2015, Oliver Sacks was diagnosed with a recurrence of cancer, and he shared this news in a *New York Times* essay that inspired readers all over the world: "I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude.... Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure."

Gratitude consists of four essays that originally appeared in *The New York Times*, accompanied by a foreword that describes the occasion of each chapter. The foreword is written by Billy Hayes, Oliver Sacks's partner, and Kate Edgar, his long time collaborator.

Gratitude Details

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Iris P says

Short but profound reflections on life, aging and confronting sickness and the end of your life with dignity and grace.

In an essay called "Mercury", Sacks reflects:

"My father, who lived to 94, often said that the 80s had been one of the most enjoyable decades of his life. He felt, as I begin to feel, not a shrinking but an enlargement of mental life and perspective. One has had a long experience of life, not only one's own life, but others', too. One has seen triumphs and tragedies, booms and busts, revolutions and wars, great achievements and deep ambiguities, too. One has seen grand theories rise, only to be toppled by stubborn facts. One is more conscious of transience and, perhaps, of beauty. At 80, one can take a long view and have a vivid, lived sense of history not possible at an earlier age. I can imagine, feel in my bones, what a century is like, which I could not do when I was 40 or 60. I do not think of old age as an ever grimmer time that one must somehow endure and make the best of, but as a time of leisure and freedom, freed from the factitious urgencies of earlier days, free to explore whatever I wish, and to bind the thoughts and feelings of a lifetime together."

Oliver Sacks was a remarkable human being who chose to live an extraordinary life.

I feel gratitude today for Oliver Sacks and for the years I've enjoyed on this earth so far.

MLE says

A short collection of essays, but one that is beautifully written, and perfectly put together. I really appreciated his thoughts on aging, and on morality. It was heavy, but it didn't feel dark or oppressive either. I liked the glimpse it gave me of the author, his thought process, and his understanding of the world. I haven't read anything by him, but he is one of my sister's favorite authors, and after this I have a deep desire to read more.

It also inspired me to look up my element year, Krypton.

????? says

In one of his essays (Mercury) in this book, Oliver Sacks mentioned how the elements and his birthdays had always been intertwined (e.g., he would say, "I'm sodium," the element with the atomic number eleven, in his eleventh birthday), and so I borrowed this idea, and used it to write to him this little eulogy:

*When he was a year old he became hydrogen and he made up galaxies and stars.
A year later, he got fused into helium, and made us laugh out loud.
At three, he was lithium, and allowed the ions inside our phones to dance around.
Then, he transformed into beryllium, and people forgot who he was.
At six years old, he was carbon, and made us and every organism we know alive.
A couple of years later, he metamorphosed into oxygen, and without him we would've died.
Fast forward to his teenage years, when he was silicon, and covered the earth's ground.
In his twenties, he became Cobalt, and colored beautiful gemstones, and made them shine.
Later on, he mutated into krypton, fictionally interesting, but inert in the world he occupied.
In his middle age, he was molybdenum, and became essential for nearly all enzymes.
In old age, he was lovely mercury, but don't be tricked, he was as dangerous as a poisonous frog.
Sadly, or thankfully, he never became uranium, nor destroyed millions of lives.
Rest in peace, you beautiful mind.*

Tiffany Reisz says

I only pray I handle the end of my life as gracefully as the great Oliver Sacks did, may he rest in peace.

Krista Regester says

A touching and very personal sentiment between Oliver Sacks and the world of readers. This is a quick and beautiful read.

Özgür says

64 sayfalık (fotoğraflar ve YKY'nin kitap listelerini içerdiği) bir kitap. Sacks'ın ömrünün son aylarında yazdı. Dört yazısından oluşan eser, Benim Hayatım isimli yazısının New York Times'ta yayımlanmasından zaman önce okuduğumu hatırlıyor. Yıldızlar önce Uyanıklar filmiyle bilmeden tanıdı. Olsam da yazar olarak yeni tanıdığım Sacks'ın yakında hayatının kaybedecek olmasına üzülmüştüm. Sonrasında Hareket Halinde (On The Move: A Life) isimli otobiyografisini de okumamıştım. Çok iyi bir hikaye anlatıcısından kendi hayatının bir bakıma çok güzel bir muhasebesini okuma fırsatı sunuyor bu kitap.

"... 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.'"

Isabel says

Um pequeno grande livro...

P. 28- "As pessoas, quando morrem, não podem ser substituídas. Deixam buracos que não podem ser colmatados, porque é destino de cada ser humano - seu destino genético e neural - ser um indivíduo único, descobrir o seu próprio caminho, viver a sua própria vida, morrer a sua própria morte.

Não posso fingir que me sinto sem medo. Mas o meu sentimento predominante é de gratidão. Amei e fui amado; recebi muito e dei alguma coisa em contrapartida; li e viajei e pensei e escrevi. Tive uma união com o mundo, essa união especial com o mundo que é a de quem escreve e a de quem lê.

Acima de tudo, fui um ser senciente, um animal pensante, neste belo planeta, e isso foi, por si só, um enorme privilégio e aventura."

Petra X says

This is a very short book. I had read two of the essays before, this time I got the audio book and listened to them. Sometimes it is a different experience. Just four essays written by Oliver Sacks before he died. All the links are to the essays as they were originally published.

The first essay, Mercury or the Joy of Old Age is a brief meditation on what it will mean to him to be very old, 80.

The second essay, My Own Life on learning the cancer from his eye has metastised and is now terminal. It's quite moving.

The third essay, My Periodic Table relates his life, and the treatment for his cancer to the elements.

The fourth essay, though, the last one, is the one that stands out for me. In part because I come from a similar background, in part because my flat in London is quite literally around the corner from Sacks' family home, although by the time I arrived there, it was only a Jewish area in a very small way. It was now an eclectic mix of young professionals, Londoners, Jamaicans and Irish. Still there was a very good bagel shop...

It is also my favourite because of a quote I have loved for a very long time, it's by Chaim Potok, from his novel The Chosen. The quote is peculiarly apposite as Sacks' cancer started in his eye.

"Human beings do not live forever, Reuven. We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye, if we measure our lives against eternity. So it may be asked what value is there to a human life. There is so much pain in the world. What does it mean to have to suffer so much, if our lives are nothing more than the blink of an eye?

I learned a long time ago, Reuven, that a blink of an eye in itself is nothing; but the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing; but the man who lives the span, he is something. He can fill that tiny span with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable though its quantity may be insignificant. A man must fill his life with meaning, meaning is not automatically given to life.

It is hard work to fill one's life with meaning- that, I do not think you understand yet. A life filled with meaning is worthy of rest. I want to be worthy of rest when I am no longer here."

The essay Sabbath is a perfect elucidation of that quote by a man who gave life meaning to many despairing people and after a long life well-lived, deserved his eternal rest.

Alev HaShalom, rest in peace, Oliver.

Carol says

A very moving audio. It made me want to hear more...

Elyse says

I listened to this audio yesterday while in the woods. (a gift to the world, by Oliver Sacks)

It felt so unflinchingly honest that it hurt.

Oliver Sacks was a remarkably accomplished man --His gifts were huge --and his heart even bigger!

Sad-tender-and so very beautiful!

PattyMacDotComma says

5★

Even if you've never read anything by neurologist Oliver Sacks, I bet you've seen the famous movie based on his book Awakenings, with Robin Williams as the Sacks character and Robert de Niro as a patient "awakened" from a catatonic state. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099077/>

Neurology may have been his professional field, but the man was so much more--a naturalist and philosopher, loved by many. Sacks wrote this tiny "quartet of essays" in the last years of his life, the first, *Mercury*, just before he's about to turn 80 and when he seems to have recovered from a melanoma in his eye – a rare type. He is enjoying life and can't believe he's arrived at such an advanced age while he still feels like "**a beginner**".

Yet he enjoys it, too, being able to take the "**long view and have a vivid, lived sense of history not possible at an earlier age. I can imagine, feel in my bones, what a century is like, which I could not do when I was forty or sixty.**" He thinks 80 is a time to explore, free of earlier "**urgencies**".

He does continue to explore, but not for long, as he soon gets the diagnosis that his melanoma has spread and his time is limited. He has a chance to appreciate the people in his life, enjoy the adulation of the public who love his work, and the opportunity to write a bit more and travel to Israel for a close cousin's 100th birthday.

While in Israel, he finds himself "**drenched with a wistfulness, something akin to nostalgia, wondering what if: What if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of a life might I have lived?"**

He had been born into a large, very religious Jewish family in England but at 18, when his mother was so horrified at his homosexuality, he "**hated religion's capacity for bigotry and cruelty**"

Shortly before his death, he writes "**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.**"

There is no doubt that the world is glad that A and B and C were not different and that Oliver Sacks became the man he did, a neurologist and philosopher who opened so many minds—those of his patients and those of his readers and admirers.

Tony says

It has been my lot to stand outside stores while family shops. It could be Venice or La Jolla or just back home. Doesn't matter. Leather coats are modeled; children's designer socks are awwwwwed at; I stand outside, watching the passing parade of life.

But on a recent trip to Seattle I was spared the awkward shuffling of stance by a daughter who finally felt some pity. Or maybe she just worried that I would wander off, being in my dotage years, and it would take too long to recover me. Oh, they still went shopping; but, I was told, there was a bookstore nearby. Let me know what you think, she said.

Well, there was indeed a bookstore, if you don't mind what you say. For not far from The Land of Nod was (drum roll, please): AmazonBooks.

I know I know I know I know. But in I went. It was It was clean. Staff was wearing sensible shoes. Books were where they were supposed to be and in alphabetical order. There was even a Goodreads Section, but filled with popularity, not what MY Goodreads friends read. It was Barnes & Noble Lite. But I can spend an hour even in a bad bookstore.

So I perused. And there, neatly stacked, was 'Gratitude' by Oliver Sacks, which has received some very nice reviews. I picked it up. Just a little thing. I thumbed through the pages of big print and wide margins. If you subtracted the blank pages, the author pictures and whatever introduction and afterword there was, you had a mere 38 pages. Four posthumous essays. At \$17 (plus the highest sales tax in the English-speaking world) that would amount to a dollar for two very sparse pages.

I looked around. Just a few well-scrubbed Seattle-ites in hiking shoes and backpacks looking rapturous in the self-help section. A plan formed in my decrepit mind. Although not a hater, nor a protester, I thought I would make my own *sub silentio* statement. I'd read the book right then and there.

And so I did. If a bit furtively.

Oliver Sacks wrote these bits when he learned he had terminal cancer. He wrote that he viewed the years of his life like the elements of the periodic table. He was Mercury when he learned of his illness and Lead when he died. He wished he could live to see (be) Bismuth, a cool name for an element, he thought. He wrote of being Jewish, and then not being Jewish enough. He wrote of being gay, how his father told him what was becoming obvious, and how his mother called him an abomination.

This was poignant and sweet, and slight. One wonders at the need, Sacks having published his memoirs already.

But Sacks was already gone when some publishing company or estate hurried this out. \$17. It did not take me 17 minutes to read it.

Some may turn in disgust that I even entered the store. Yet I finished a book, a dying man's kind thoughts at sunset, while others shopped. Sacks was thankful at the end, for his friends and his journey. And I too was thankful, thankful that I didn't have to stand on a sidewalk, thankful that some conglomerate would not get my \$17. To them, the Amazon gods, I express my GRATITUDE.

Lubinka Dimitrova says

A bittersweet reminder to count our blessings each and every day.

Brendon Schrodinger says

David read this recently and gave it a great big thumbs up, and it inspired me to pick it up also. It's a very small book and came cheap as an ebook, and I finished it easily one night before bed. It consists of four

essays that Oliver wrote before his death. From just before his terminal diagnosis to a couple of months before his death.

Oliver writes logically and emotionally about a life well-lived. He has a certain profound wisdom that comes from a life with many experiences. And there is no bullshit here. There is no agenda to his writing. He is thankful for the life he has led.

And we're thankful too.

This being only the third book of his I have read, I conclude that I need to read a lot more Oliver Sacks.

Britany says

Oliver Sacks pens these four essays over the span of a few years at different times during his battle with an eye melanoma that metastasized. Short and poignant, these essays really hit home. I can only imagine the lasting legacy they've created for Dr. Sacks. This book is short at only 45 pages and it is interspersed with pictures. What a way to memorialize a person that has been a resounding voice in the written word.

Karen says

Four essays written prior to his death, a reflection on living and coming to terms with his death.

Nelson Zagalo says

Não é bem um livro, é antes um pequeno conjunto de 4 artigos de jornal, os últimos 4 artigos escritos por Sacks, todos para o New York Times - "The Joy of Old Age" (6 jul. 2013), "My Own Life" (19 fev. 2015), "My Periodic Table" (24 jul. 2015) e "Sabbath" (14 ago. 2015) - o que não vai além das 5 mil palavras, 20 páginas.

Sacks é um dos psiquiatras e neurologistas mais famosos do século passado, principalmente pelos vários livros publicados, de entre os quais o mais famoso é sem dúvida "O Homem que Confundiu a Mulher com um Chapéu" (1985) com as suas histórias mirabolantes, seguido de "Despertares" (1973) por ter sido passado a cinema num filme homónimo com a dupla Robin Williams e Robert De Niro. Pelo meu lado sugiro fortemente o seu livro de 2007 "Musicophilia", mais pela discussão em redor da consciência do que da música. E talvez por isto mesmo o livro que quero ainda ler dele é o recentemente editado pela Rd'A "O Rio da Consciência" (2017).

Quanto a este Gratidão, sendo muito curto dá-nos apenas um lampejo sobre Sacks, e sobre o seu sentir após ter sabido que tinha poucos meses de vida. Queria dizer que é uma lufada de otimismo, que é aquilo de que Sacks fala, e que reflete bem o que ele sempre foi, mas o que se sente no final da sua leitura é uma pancada enorme de melancolia. Por isso leia-se sabendo o que se vai ler.

David Schaafsma says

I first read the work of neurologist Oliver Sacks when I was in graduate school, and was researching the use of narrative, of storytelling, as a form of inquiry in a range of disciplines. Stories in neurology, the ultimate mystifying brain science? But it made sense to me. There are scientific research and facts, but the way to fully understand these facts is in the context of actual human lives, in anecdote, and biography, and experience. Thus I read *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* that features a range of fascinating neurological oddities as a way of illustrating all we do and do not yet know about the human brain. Sacks's early work with men who had had sleeping sickness—giving them L-Dopa to help them “awaken”—was made into a movie with Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro. It would be an important, hopeful book a couple decades later for me as we tried (and largely failed, so far!) to retrieve speech in my severely autistic son.

So I read Sacks for how to use storytelling to convey complexity in research initially, and then, over time, to help me begin to understand the tragedy of what was happening to my son's brain. And in that process I read *An Anthropologist on Mars*, which featured Temple Grandin, the high-functioning autistic, and in order to understand yet another son who is having some psychotic episodes, I more recently read *Hallucinations*. Sacks made the mystifying world of neurology accessible and endlessly fascinating. He gave me permission to tell and a model for telling my own stories about my sons.

Sacks had his own neurological disability, too, prosopagnosia, or "face blindness", which prevented him from recognizing even his own reflection, and contributed to his shyness.

Gratitude is a collection of four short essays Sacks wrote at the end of his life at 82. “Mercury” was written just before his 80th birthday, which concludes, “I am looking forward to being eighty” in typically positive fashion. Until almost the end, Sacks swam a mile every day. He was working every day to finish several books, including his memoirs. “My Own Life” was written just after he was told, at 81, he had multiple metastases in his liver, stemming from an ocular melanoma treated nine years before. In it, he comes to write,

“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; I have read and travelled and thought and written. Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and an adventure.”

“My Periodic Table” was written at 82, months before the end. Though he still swam every day, he was in decline from the cancer but reflected on his love of science as a source of passion and comfort from loss. He talks about the numbered elements of the periodic table as corresponding with the years of one's life.

“Sabbath” features Sacks's sweet last words (though there are drafts of several books, as well) going back to his British and Jewish roots, come full circle in his life.

Sacks's *Gratitude* makes me grateful. It's a lovingly produced little book with photographs by partner/lover Bill Hayes. That Sacks kept his homosexuality a secret for much of his life is a sad testament to an age and a time past. RIP, Oliver, whom I knew well through reading his stories.

David says

This is a set of four short, but beautiful and profound essays by Oliver Sacks. They are reflections on his life, after learning that he was terminally ill.

I have read several of his books on neurology, but in this short book I learned about Sacks himself, and his life. I never realized that he was an "elements guy". That is to say, his hobby was learning and collecting elements from the periodic table. And he had a lifelong love for the physical sciences, beyond his career in the biological sciences.

What is most impressive is Sacks' positive attitude, his gentle style, and his tolerance for people with beliefs unlike his own. I highly recommend this book for everyone.

Mia (Parentheses Enthusiast) says

There is nothing I can say about this book- a very brief collection of four essays- besides that it is extraordinarily beautiful, illuminating, thoughtful, and, most of all, lucid. Sacks brings his life to a close within these tiny pages, and it is nothing short of touching. He has the sort of mentality- the unceasing wonder at (and fondness for) the world and the people and creatures on it- that is truly inspiring, and reading his works here one can't help but be a little proud of the human race, if we were able to produce a man who could sum up something so grand- an entire life- in so few words, but still have it be so profoundly moving.
