Awakenings’ author, neurologist Oliver Sacks dies at 82

Posted by TBN_News On 09/01/2015

(9 July 1933 – 30 August 2015)

Oliver Wolf Sacks, CBE was an English neurologist and author, known for writing best-selling case histories of his patients' disorders. Some of his books have been adapted for film and stage.

After studying at The Queen's College, Oxford (he received his medical degrees in 1960), he moved to the U.S. for his internship at Mount Zion Hospital in San Francisco. He relocated to New York in 1965 where he became professor of Neurology at New York University School of Medicine. Between 2007 and 2012, he was professor of neurology and psychiatry at Columbia University, where he also held the position of "Columbia Artist", which recognized his contributions to art and science. He had also been on the faculty of Yeshiva University's Albert Einstein College of Medicine and had been a visiting professor at the University of Warwick.

Sacks was the author of numerous best-selling books, including collections of case studies of people with neurological disorders. His writings have been featured in a wider range of media than any other contemporary medical author, with The New York Times referring to him as a "poet laureate of contemporary medicine". His books describe cases with a wealth of narrative detail about the experiences of patients and how they coped, often illuminating how the normal brain deals with perception, memory and individuality.

Awakenings (1973), an autobiographical account of his efforts to help people with encephalitis lethargica regain proper neurological function, was adapted into the Academy Award-nominated film of the same name in 1990 starring Robin Williams and Robert De Niro. He and his book Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain were the subject of "Musical Minds", an episode of the PBS series Nova. In 2008 Sacks was awarded a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours for services to literature.

Sacks never married, and lived alone for most of his life. He declined to share details from his personal life until late in his life. He addressed his homosexuality for the first time in his 2015 autobiography On the Move: A Life. During his early career, he indulged in staggering bouts of pharmacological experimentation, underwent a fierce regimen of bodybuilding at Muscle Beach (for a time he held a California record, after he performed a full squat with 600 pounds across his shoulders), and racked up more than 100,000 leather-clad miles on his motorcycle. And then one day he gave it all up—the drugs, the sex, the motorcycles, the bodybuilding.

Celibate for about 35 years, he began a relationship with writer and New York Times contributor Bill Hayes in 2008. He noted in a 2001 interview that severe shyness—which he described as "a disease"—had been a lifelong impediment to his personal interactions.

Sacks swam almost every day for decades, especially when he lived in the City Island section of the Bronx. He discussed his work and his personal health problems in a 28 June 2011 BBC documentary Imagine. He wrote about a near-fatal accident he had at age 41, a year after the publication of Awakenings, when he fell and broke his leg while mountaineering alone.

Sacks waged a lifelong battle with prosopagnosia, known popularly as "face blindness", which he discussed at length in a 2010 New Yorker piece.

Sacks underwent radiation therapy in 2006 for a uveal melanoma in his right eye. He discussed his loss of stereoscopic vision, caused by the treatment, in a 2010 article, then expanded on it in his book The Mind's Eye later that year.

In January 2015, metastases from the ocular tumour were discovered in his liver and brain. Sacks announced this development in a February New York Times op-ed piece and estimated his remaining time in "months". He expressed his intent to "live in the richest, deepest, most productive way I can". He added: "I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight."

Sacks died from the disease on 30 August 2015, at his home in Manhattan, at the age of 82.