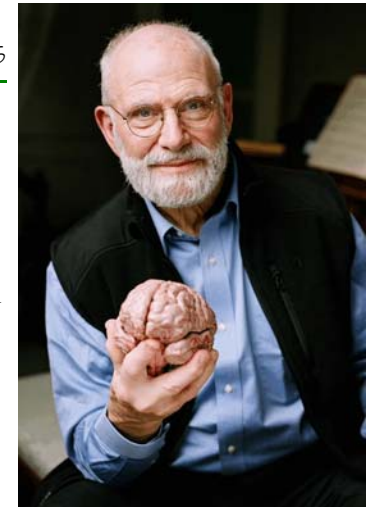


“A Matter of Identity”

Oliver Sacks



‘What’ll it be today?’ he says, rubbing his hands. ‘Half a pound of Virginia, a nice piece of Nova?’

(Evidently, he saw me as a customer - he would often pick up the phone on the ward, and say ‘Thompson’s Delicatessen.’)

‘Oh Mr Thompson!’ I exclaim, ‘and who do you think I am?’

‘Good heavens, the light’s bad - I took you for a customer. As if it isn’t my old friend Tom Pitkins ... Me and Tom’ (he whispers in an aside to the nurse) ‘was always going to the races together.’

‘Mr Thompson, you are mistaken again.’

‘So I am,’ he rejoins, not put out for a moment. ‘Why would you be wearing a white coat if you were Tom? You’re Hymie, the kosher butcher next door. No bloodstains on your coat, though. Business bad today? You’ll look like a slaughterhouse by the end of the week!’

Feeling a bit swept away myself in this whirlpool of identities, I finger the stethoscope dangling from my neck.

‘A stethoscope!’ he exploded. ‘And you pretending to be Hymie! You mechanics are all starting to fancy yourselves as doctors, what with your white coats and stethoscopes - as if you need a stethoscope to listen to a car! So, you’re my old friend Manners from the Mobil station up the block, come in and get your boloney-and-rye...’

William Thompson rubbed his hands again, in his salesman-grocer’s gesture, and looked for the counter. Not finding it, he looked at me strangely again.

‘Where am I?’ he said, with a sudden scared look. ‘I thought I was in my shop, doctor. My mind must have wandered... You’ll be wanting my shirt off, to sound me as usual?’

‘No, not the usual, I’m *not* your usual doctor.’

‘Indeed, you’re not. I could see that straightaway! You’re not my usual chest-thumping doctor. And, by God, you’ve a beard! You look like Sigmund Freud - have I gone bonkers, round the bend?’

‘No, Mr Thompson. Not round the bend. Just a little trouble with your memory - difficulties remembering and recognising people.’

‘My memory has been playing me some tricks,’ he admitted. ‘Sometimes I make mistakes - I take somebody for somebody else... What’ll it be now - Nova or Virginia?’

So it would happen, with variations, every time - with improvisations, always prompt, often funny, sometimes brilliant, and ultimately tragic. Mr Thompson would identify me - misidentify, pseudo-identify me - as a dozen different people in the course of five minutes. He would whirl, fluently, from one guess, one hypothesis, one belief, to the next, without any appearance of uncertainty at any point - he never knew who I was, or what and where *he* was, an ex-grocer, with severe Korsakov’s syndrome, in a neurological institution.

He remembered nothing for more than a few seconds. He was continually disoriented. Abysses of amnesia continually opened beneath him, but he would bridge them, nimbly, by fluent confabulations and fictions of all kinds. For him they were not fictions, but how he suddenly saw, or interpreted, the world. Its radical flux and incoherence could not be tolerated, acknowledged, for an instant - there was, instead, this strange, delirious, quasi-coherence, as Mr Thompson, with his ceaseless, unconscious, quick-fire inventions

continually improvised a world around him - an Arabian Nights world, a phantasmagoria, a dream, of ever-changing people, figures, situations - continual, kaleidoscopic mutations and transformations. For Mr Thompson, however, it was not a tissue of ever-changing, evanescent fancies and illusion, but a wholly normal, stable and factual world. So far as *he* was concerned, there was nothing the matter.

On one occasion, Mr Thompson went for a trip, identifying himself at the front desk as ‘the Revd. William Thompson’, ordering a taxi, and taking off for the day. The taxi driver, whom we later spoke to, said he had never had so fascinating a passenger, for Mr Thompson told him one story after another, amazing personal stories full of fantastic adventures. ‘He seemed to have been everywhere, done everything, met everyone. I could hardly believe so much was possible in a single life,’ he said. ‘It is not exactly a single life,’ we answered. ‘It’s all very curious - a matter of identity.’

Jimmie G., another Korsakov’s patient, whom I have already described at length (Chapter Two), had long since *cooled down* from his acute Korsakov’s syndrome, and seemed to have settled into a state of permanent lostness (or, perhaps, a permanent now-seeming dream or reminiscence of the past). But Mr Thompson, only just out of hospital - his Korsakov’s had exploded just three weeks before, when he developed a high fever, raved, and ceased to recognise all his family - was still on the boil, was still in an almost frenzied confabulatory delirium (of the sort sometimes called ‘Korsakov’s psychosis’, thought it is not really a psychosis at all), continually creating a world and self, to replace what was continually being forgotten and lost. Such a frenzy may call forth quite brilliant powers of invention and fancy - a veritable confabulatory genius - for such a patient *must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment*. We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative - whose continuity, whose sense, *is* our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a ‘narrative’, and that this narrative *is* us, our identities.

If we wish to know about a man, we ask ‘what is his story - his real, inmost story?’ - for each of us *is* a biography, a story. Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us - through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives - we are each of us unique.

To be ourselves we must *have* ourselves - possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must ‘recollect’ ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, or ourselves. A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self.

from “The Man who mistook his wife for a hat” by Oliver Sacks, Picador, London 1985