

## Brothers: Remembering Oliver Sacks

Jay Neugeboren

In spring 1996, I sent an advance copy of my book, *Imagining Robert*, to Oliver Sacks, the well-known neurologist and author. We had never met, and so I sent the letter to him in care of the Bronx Psychiatric Center.

Several weeks later, I received a reply. “Your immensely moving book affected me especially deeply,” he wrote, “because like you, I have a schizophrenic brother who has been submitted to everything from insulin coma to ‘the latest’ and has spent much of his time in and out of hospitals. Like your brother’s, his intellect and humor survive, but it has been a grim and lonely life for the most part.” He ended his letter with these words: “I am wondering if I should show your letter to my brother Michael.”

By 1996, my brother Robert had been in and out of mental hospitals, psychiatric wards, and halfway houses for more than 30 years, and I had been—a term neither Oliver nor I cared for—his “caretaker” through these years.

Oliver and I met soon after I received his letter, and we talked at length about our brothers. Up to this point, Oliver had never, in print, written about or even mentioned his brother. Still, he delighted in my brother’s humor (“It’s okay that I’m in a mental hospital, Jay—because I’m *in* sane, don’t you see?” Robert would regularly tell me), which was, he said, not unlike *his* brother’s sense of humor. Oliver and I also shared the experience many siblings share when a brother or sister has a long-term serious and persistent mental disorder: although we *knew* that you can’t “catch” schizophrenia the way you catch measles, we had each experienced deep and troubling fears that we, too, might go mad and wind up like our brothers.

By writing about people not unlike our brothers—individuals who, because of their particular conditions, whether schizophrenia or autism, depression or Tourette’s syndrome, lived often on the margins of ordinary society, and were regarded as “other”—Oliver enabled us to understand that they were at least as fascinating, complex, and human as the rest of us, and he helped us to better understand ourselves and who we are—our alleged “normality” perhaps?—compared with them. And he was not just splendidly articulate about the biological, neurological, and chemical elements that play into our varied medical conditions, but, always, about our individual and very human qualities.

In addition to his enormous gifts as a scientist and physician, Oliver was also a natural and gifted storyteller, and although he and I talked about many things—about our childhoods (we were both raised in observant Jewish homes),

music, geology, food, travel—no time together passed without talk about our writing and our writing habits. And whenever we had those talks, Oliver would become boyishly bewildered about the fact that I spent most of my days, and a fair number of nights, writing novels and short stories.

“How do you just *make things up*?” he would ask. “I don’t understand that at all. How can you just make things up?”

“But you’re a marvelous storyteller,” I’d reply. “What has made you the writer you are—what you do that no other writer has done—is to take case histories and turn them into fascinating, wonderfully readable, magical *tales*.”

“Perhaps,” he would reply. “But I’m writing about *real* human beings—I’m not conjuring up people from—from what?—from some mysterious realm I seem to have no access to.”

And so it would go.

We took pleasure from the parallels in our brothers’ lives—how they had both somehow come—after god-awful times we wished on no one—to many years of relative peace: my brother living outside hospitals and psychiatric wards in New York City for a dozen years and, like Michael in London, able to get around on his own. This had come about because of the publication of *Imagining Robert* and because of a psychologist at Bronx Psychiatric Center, Dr. Alvin Pam, head of the psychology department at the hospital, who had been a colleague of Oliver’s at Bronx Psychiatric Center. Against all prognostications—that Robert would never be capable of living outside a locked hospital ward—Dr. Pam, after reading *Imagining Robert*, had offered to work with Robert and had succeeded where others had failed. This made for a sweet convergence in the paths our lives had taken—Oliver’s and mine, and our brothers’.

Like Michael, Robert retained his spirit and humor to the end—an unexpected and welcome end where, like Michael, he spent his days not on a psychiatric ward, but in a pleasant nursing home. And it was also because of our conversations, Oliver said, that he had at last begun writing about Michael and of how doing so—no easy thing for him—had given him both relief and pleasure.

The last 15 years of Michael’s life, like my brother Robert’s life—another parallel we remarked on—were “relatively tranquil,” Oliver wrote in *On the Move*: “He helped others and had a role, an identity he had never had at home, and he had a little life outside Ealon House, going for walks in the neighborhood and eating at a diner in Woollisden Green . . . I would stay in a nearby hotel when I went to London, now

that the [family] house was sold, and invite Michael there for a Sunday brunch. And a couple of times, Michael invited me to *his* diner, playing the host and paying the bill; this clearly gave him great pleasure.”

When Robert was living in a halfway house on Staten Island, he and I had brunch one Sunday at the Country Club Diner, and—a story I told Oliver during one of our last visits—it was on that day that I first told Robert, my hands trembling, that I was planning to write a book about us. He asked if I thought the book would make him rich and famous. I hoped so, I said. When I asked if he’d be willing to talk with me about his life in and out of hospitals and halfway houses—a question I’d been putting off for two decades—and added that I was afraid he might not want to, Robert was surprised: “Why would you think I wouldn’t want to talk with you?” he asked.

A short while later, getting ready to part ways—Robert would return to his halfway house, and I would take the ferry back to Manhattan—I went to the restroom, and when I returned to our booth, it was empty, the check for our meal gone. I looked around and saw Robert waiting near the entrance, at the checkout cash register. He was smiling broadly,

and when I asked about the check, he told me he had paid it. “You’re on *my* island now,” he said.

Some time during the first year of our friendship, Oliver and I attended a party together to celebrate the movie “Twitch and Shout,” which is about people with Tourette’s syndrome. It was at this party that we discovered we were both swimmers.

“I swim every day,” I said to Oliver.

“So do I,” he said, and he added that many of his ideas for writing—even entire sentences and paragraphs—came to him while he was swimming.

“It’s the same for me!” I exclaimed.

“Well,” he said. “Then we are brothers.”

#### AUTHOR AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

Mr. Neugeboren (e-mail: jneug@earthlink.net) is the author of 22 books, including two prize-winning books about mental illness, *Imagining Robert: My Brother, Madness, and Survival*, and *Transforming Madness: New Lives for People Living With Mental Illness*. He serves on many boards, including the New York City Metro chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Jeffrey L. Geller, M.D., M.P.H., is editor of this column.

*Psychiatric Services* 2016; 67:594–595; doi: 10.1176/appi.ps.670601

## Coming in July

- Hiring independent contractors as CMHC clinicians: effects on EBPs
- Severe mental illness in LGBT populations: a literature review
- Three proximal indicators for assessment of short-term violence risk
- Assisted outpatient treatment and long-term use of antipsychotics