

An Anthropologist On Mars

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Colour Blindness and the Reconstruction of Visual Identity

Oliver Sacks, in the story *In The Case of the Colour Blind Painter*, gives a vivid description of a man who suffers an unusual condition after a car accident. The character is known as Mr I. I, the author, explain his symptoms as: "My vision was such that everything appeared to me as a black and white television screen..... My vision became that of an eagle – I could see a worm wiggling a block away. The sharpness of focus is incredible. But – I AM TOTALLY COLOR-BLIND." (Heywood et al., 2003)

Various tests were conducted; the doctors concluded he had a very rare cerebral achromatopsia as they discovered there was no dysfunction of the eye. Complete colour blindness was due to his brain damage. Mr. I's blindness is rare because he retained his awareness of shades of colour when he could only notice a shade of black and white. Mr. I suffer from a condition different from a typical symptom of visual agnosia. This is where an individual loses his/her sense of colour but does not acknowledge that he has lost the faculty.

Mr. I felt uncomfortable when he was watching the television and realized he did not see "real black and white." He was known to watch a black and white TV as he found watching coloured Television unnatural. The author reveals how Mr. I became a successful artist through his internal graphic descriptions (hence external) world. Mr. I could not distinguish things he saw with his eyes open from when he attempted to recall scenes; all he saw were unpleasing shades.

Memory, Illness, and the Case of Greg F

Greg F. spent his early childhood in the 1950s, raised by an average family. Like many of his generations in the 60s and 70s, he ended up as a hippie. He moved to New York, did drugs, had lots of promiscuous sex and attended many concerts. He later was involved in the teachings of Swami Bhakti Vedanta, an International Society for Krishna Consciousness. This made him respected among a group of people. He did not lie in any particular place and would spend most of his time meditating, sitting in a place and staring off into nothing.

One time, when he was visited by his parent, they realized that Greg was not enlightened but had a brain tumour that pressed on his frontal lobe. The cancer had developed and was so big. Therefore, it could not be removed. So, he was sent to an independent institution for treatment.

Greg could not create new memories. If told something new, he would forget after a few minutes. His

case was fascinating because Greg was forever stuck as a hippie. The author of this story talks about the ability to distinguish between memories of events and memories of a trained response, which is fascinating.

Neurological Difference and Professional Adaptation

In the next chapter of “A Surgeon’s Life.” Oliver Sacks develops the central themes of An Anthropologist on Mars. Oliver Sacks looks at a spectacular case of an individual who is unable to overcome his mental difference but thrives at his profession partly due to it. (Sacks, O., 1995)

There is a similarity between this surgeon and Mr. I, the colour-blind painter who undergoes a renaissance because of his unique visual perspective. Nevertheless, there is a similarity to Temple Grandin, an engineer who had autism, which increased her understanding of herd animals and their environment.

Just as people doubt the idea of a colour-blind painter, they might scoff at the idea of a surgeon with Tourette syndrome. Fortunately, Carl Bennett is an example of what a person living with Tourette syndrome can accomplish. Sack follows Bennet while he is doing his rounds at the hospital and notices how his Tourette syndrome, which frequently results in hyperfocus periods. This particular skill has helped Bennett become successful in medical school. A Surgeon’s Life paints a picture of a man who has a neurological disorder, transforming his life into a successful doctor.

Restored Sight and the Difficulty of Learning to See

The next story is particularly fascinating in its relevance to my recent discussion about a picture of a head. To See and Not See revolves around Virgil, a 50-year-old blind man since childhood. He is so used to his blindness that he has his lifestyle and identity regardless of his deficit. Virgil has cataracts that obstructed his eyes, and they can be removed. Sacks asks, “Would it be normal?” before delving deep into Virgil’s story. Virgil’s cataracts are removed, but apparently, his eyesight is not restored. After receiving the gift of “sight”, he becomes agnostic. He can see, but the thing he sees has no meaning to him. There are “no visual memories to support a perception.” The brain cannot create any sense from the visuals he was. A good deal of his recognition of objects depended on how it felt in his hands. For instance, he could not see all the body parts of his cats; he could only take in the tail, paws, and nose.

Being blind for the longest time had an effect on Virgil; his neural cells in the brain can only reroute, making use of several neurological processes. For instance, his hearing is exceptional compared to an

average person. He never experienced his newly discovered vision as humans did, and he often had to revert to closing his eyes for objects to feel less confusing.

“The Landscape of His Dreams” is closely related to the surgeon who had Tourette syndrome. In this story, there is an artist who obsessively constructs and paints a very detailed 3-dimensional image of his hometown by memory. Oliver Sacks writes about a man who is greatly obsessed with his hometown. He left his hometown, Pontito, Italy, and moved to America. As a child, Franco is traumatized by the Nazis, his father later dies leaving him a 10-year-old fatherless boy. When he goes, he promises his mother that will rebuild his hometown which he loves dearly. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.)

Memory, Art, and the Return of a Lost World

After leaving for America, he starts to have vivid dreams about his hometown before the Nazis destroyed it. His disorder also starts to develop when he is in America. Soon after that he begins painting, Franco has never painted in his life, he was not a painter, but now realizes that he is a good and accurate painter. Thus, his obsessive painting begins. His art becomes a way of rebuilding Pontito as he had promised his mother, and he starts painting everything from his memories as a young boy. These paintings look exaggerated when he visits his hometown.

Better yet it is reductive, absurd in believing that temporal lobe epilepsy or seizure of “reminiscence” could constitute the final trigger of Franco’s vision. The character that has a high attachment to his mother tends towards nostalgia and idealization. His actual history revolves around his sudden loss of childhood paradise and a father. These are the least of his desires that the author achieves and represent a whole, equally significant culture.

Oliver Sack tends to utilize footnotes and references or any other related stories or works in anecdotal style. In my opinion, one tends to think footnotes are interesting when they are the main text. An example is seen in “Prodigies” after comparing various talents of an autistic savant as a “normal talent” that comes and goes. The author directs the readers to a footnote in which he states, “It is possible for savant and normal talents to coexist, sometimes in separate spheres (as with Nabokov); sometimes, confusingly, in the same sphere. I have had this expression strongly with an extremely young gifted man that I have known since infancy.....” These footnotes act as an additional insight into the subject matter and neurological conditions instead of providing an understanding of the text. I get myself reading more and more of them, gaining an in-depth knowledge of the subject discussed. I discovered that Sacks does not want to interrupt the main flow of the story, and he wants to emphasize that there is more to each condition than the story is letting on.

Autism, Empathy, and Temple Grandin's Distinctive Intelligence

In the final chapter, "An Anthropologist on Mars," Sacks tells the story of an autistic woman, Temple Grandin. This woman has a Ph. D in animal science, and her work involved creating designs that are more humane in terms of the methods of holding livestock. She states that she "thinks in pictures" and her experience on concepts, innovations and visualizing words is not uncommon in persons who have autism.

She can comprehend more of the images made from her brain, which are concocted compared to what she hears in conversations or when reading fictional books. The author paints into the reader's mind that the visual processing of autistic people in their brains is fortified by stronger, thereby rendering them to think more using visions than languages.

Sacks explains what we have viewed as a negative trait of people with autism. He states, "She (Temple) believes that, if some parts of her brain are faulty or defective, others are very highly developed – spectacularly in those who have savant syndrome, but to some degree, in different ways, in all individuals with autism."

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