

By [Blink Staff](#)

Over the weekend the world lost a great dignitary when famed neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks passed away due to cancer at the age of 82. Dr. Sacks is well known for several best-selling books including *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Awakenings*, which chronicled his experience using the drug L-Dopa to bring patients who survived the 1917-1928 encephalitis epidemic out of their persistent catatonic state.

What made Dr. Sacks such a wonderful contributor to the academy of human knowledge wasn't only his contributions to the medical field; his effusive and detailed documentation of the human condition showcased his incredible ability to understand people—all kinds of people. For these reasons his loss will be felt across many fields of study, including user experience research. Here, a few Blinkers would like to pay tribute to Dr. Oliver Sacks.

Amy L. Dickson

I was first introduced to Dr. Sacks through [NPR's program Radiolab](#) where he appeared as a frequent contributor. It was on a live show where I learned about a condition called prosopagnosia, or "face blindness," where certain people demonstrate difficulty or an inability to recognize human faces, sometimes even the faces of ones they love or themselves. I finally had a name for this condition I had struggled with my whole life! In his descriptions of the disability, Dr. Sacks revealed that he also suffered from face blindness. Instead of only explaining the neurological root of the condition, Dr. Sacks told story after story of how he deals with his disability, poking fun at himself for mistaking another man for his own reflection. Or how he would hide in corners at parties to avoid telling people he was sorry he couldn't remember having met them before. His narratives gave texture and a living quality to this condition in a way that a textbook or diagnosis never could.

When later chiding himself about his inability to paint, portrait artist Chuck Close summarized Dr. Sacks' lasting contributions perfectly when he said, "Your words paint the most specific portraits of people's lives...You celebrate your connectedness with humanity in a really important way. It's a way that we can identify with even if it's a problem we don't have. Empathy is the mortar that holds society together. Telling stories in a riveting way allows us to empathize and care about people."

Dr. Sacks built his entire research practice not on treating the body, but on treating the BEING. By taking time with his patients to ask for more than their symptoms, but also their feelings, he came to understand each individual on a human level. He valued every human experience, from the mundane to the most extraordinary. Thankfully for us, he documented his work carefully and we can continue to learn from him in the years to come.

Ross Bohner

Oliver Sacks has been my favorite author for the past decade. His works paved the way for my introduction into neuroscience, human computer interaction, cognitive psychology, virtual reality, and my appreciation for jazz. His works may not directly impact my work at Blink but instead have been a foundation for my understanding of the human condition, influencing my phenomenology and perception the world. I cannot do justice to the impact of his work on the humanizing of medical research or opening research to non-practitioners through narrative.

There is an email in my drafts folder I was working on, congratulating Dr. Sacks on his autobiography and asking a couple of questions regarding research on biological nanomachines implementing Edelman's theory on neuronal group selection. I was wondering if there was additional research in narrative form for those mechanisms. I guess that email will never be sent now.

Tristan Plank

I fell in love with Sacks' writing and work in neurology when I was an undergraduate studying psychology at the University of Colorado. I remember the first time I read *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and realized how storytelling could bring scary, bizarre, or extraordinary experiences down to earth and make them relatable and, at times, comical. As I moved into this industry, one that pairs psychology with design and several other disciplines, I think one thing that continues to strike me about Sacks' work is the value of storytelling for all of us and the ways in which storytelling helps us find empathy, create bridges, and drives us toward change.

Even near the end of his life Sacks' way with words continued to strike a very deep and resonant chord within me and, based on the profound reactions to his passing, within many others as well. I would urge everyone to read [his reflection upon learning about his cancer](#), which was published in *The New York Times* in February of this year shortly after his diagnosis. It demonstrates a poignant perspective from a brilliant man on how we all can approach life and death. At the end of life, I hope that all of us can reflect positively on the work we have done and lives we have lived in the way that Sacks did. His parting words in his final piece, [published just 15 days ago](#), will probably continue to give me pause for years to come:

"And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, 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. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest."

Thank you for your contributions, good Dr. Sacks. We hope you rest well.

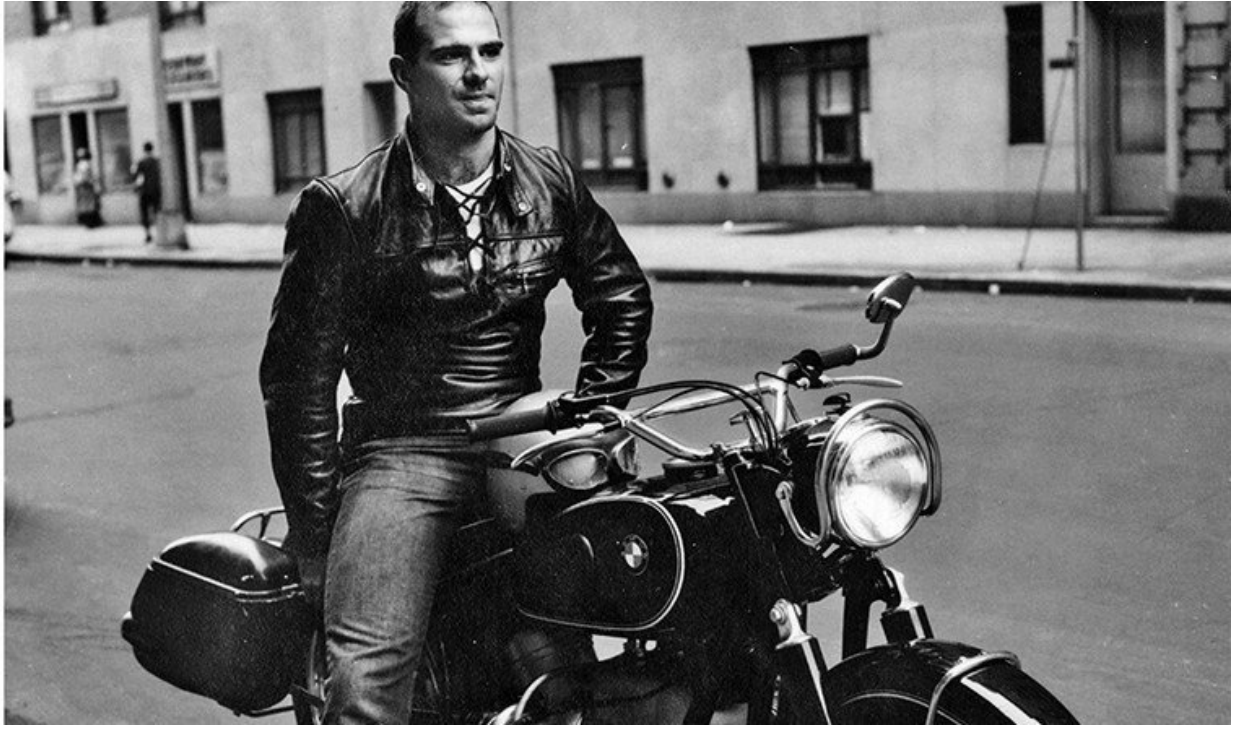


Image Source: On the Move by Oliver Sacks