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SundayReview | OPINION

Oliver Sacks: Sabbath

By OLIVER SACKS AUG. 14, 2015

MY mother and her 17 brothers and sisters had an Orthodox upbringing — all photographs of their father show him wearing a yarmulke, and I was told that he woke up if it fell off during the night. My father, too, came from an Orthodox background. Both my parents were very conscious of the Fourth Commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”), and the Sabbath (Shabbos, as we called it in our Litvak way) was entirely different from the rest of the week. No work was allowed, no driving, no use of the telephone; it was forbidden to switch on a light or a stove. Being physicians, my parents made exceptions. They could not take the phone off the hook or completely avoid driving; they had to be available, if necessary, to see patients, or operate, or deliver babies.

We lived in a fairly Orthodox Jewish community in Cricklewood, in Northwest London — the butcher, the baker, the grocer, the greengrocer, the fishmonger, all closed their shops in good time for the Shabbos, and did not open their shutters till Sunday morning. All of them, and all our neighbors, we imagined, were celebrating Shabbos in much the same fashion as we did.

Around midday on Friday, my mother doffed her surgical identity and attire and devoted herself to making gefilte fish and other delicacies for Shabbos. Just before evening fell, she would light the ritual candles, cupping their flames with her hands, and murmuring a prayer. We would all put on

clean, fresh Shabbos clothes, and gather for the first meal of the Sabbath, the evening meal. My father would lift his silver wine cup and chant the blessings and the Kiddush, and after the meal, he would lead us all in chanting the grace.

On Saturday mornings, my three brothers and I trailed our parents to Cricklewood Synagogue on Walm Lane, a huge shul built in the 1930s to accommodate part of the exodus of Jews from the East End to Cricklewood at that time. The shul was always full during my boyhood, and we all had our assigned seats, the men downstairs, the women — my mother, various aunts and cousins — upstairs; as a little boy, I sometimes waved to them during the service. Though I could not understand the Hebrew in the prayer book, I loved its sound and especially hearing the old medieval prayers sung, led by our wonderfully musical hazan.

All of us met and mingled outside the synagogue after the service — and we would usually walk to the house of my Auntie Florrie and her three children to say a Kiddush, accompanied by sweet red wine and honey cakes, just enough to stimulate our appetites for lunch. After a cold lunch at home — gefilte fish, poached salmon, beetroot jelly — Saturday afternoons, if not interrupted by emergency medical calls for my parents, would be devoted to family visits. Uncles and aunts and cousins would visit us for tea, or we them; we all lived within walking distance of one another.

The Second World War decimated our Jewish community in Cricklewood, and the Jewish community in England as a whole was to lose thousands of people in the postwar years. Many Jews, including cousins of mine, emigrated to Israel; others went to Australia, Canada or the States; my eldest brother, Marcus, went to Australia in 1950. Many of those who stayed assimilated and adopted diluted, attenuated forms of Judaism. Our synagogue, which would be packed to capacity when I was a child, grew emptier by the year.

I chanted my bar mitzvah portion in 1946 to a relatively full synagogue,

including several dozen of my relatives, but this, for me, was the end of formal Jewish practice. I did not embrace the ritual duties of a Jewish adult — praying every day, putting on tefillin before prayer each weekday morning — and I gradually became more indifferent to the beliefs and habits of my parents, though there was no particular point of rupture until I was 18. It was then that my father, inquiring into my sexual feelings, compelled me to admit that I liked boys.

“I haven’t *done* anything,” I said, “it’s just a feeling — but don’t tell Ma, she won’t be able to take it.”

He *did* tell her, and the next morning she came down with a look of horror on her face, and shrieked at me: “You are an abomination. I wish you had never been born.” (She was no doubt thinking of the verse in Leviticus that read, “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: They shall surely be put to death; their blood *shall be* upon them.”)

The matter was never mentioned again, but her harsh words made me hate religion’s capacity for bigotry and cruelty.

After I qualified as a doctor in 1960, I removed myself abruptly from England and what family and community I had there, and went to the New World, where I knew nobody. When I moved to Los Angeles, I found a sort of community among the weight lifters on Muscle Beach, and with my fellow neurology residents at U.C.L.A., but I craved some deeper connection — “meaning” — in my life, and it was the absence of this, I think, that drew me into near-suicidal addiction to amphetamines in the 1960s.

Recovery started, slowly, as I found meaningful work in New York, in a chronic care hospital in the Bronx (the “Mount Carmel” I wrote about in “Awakenings”). I was fascinated by my patients there, cared for them deeply, and felt something of a mission to tell their stories — stories of situations

virtually unknown, almost unimaginable, to the general public and, indeed, to many of my colleagues. I had discovered my vocation, and this I pursued doggedly, single-mindedly, with little encouragement from my colleagues. Almost unconsciously, I became a storyteller at a time when medical narrative was almost extinct. This did not dissuade me, for I felt my roots lay in the great neurological case histories of the 19th century (and I was encouraged here by the great Russian neuropsychologist A. R. Luria). It was a lonely but deeply satisfying, almost monkish existence that I was to lead for many years.

During the 1990s, I came to know a cousin and contemporary of mine, Robert John Aumann, a man of remarkable appearance with his robust, athletic build and long white beard that made him, even at 60, look like an ancient sage. He is a man of great intellectual power but also of great human warmth and tenderness, and deep religious commitment — “commitment,” indeed, is one of his favorite words. Although, in his work, he stands for rationality in economics and human affairs, there is no conflict for him between reason and faith.

He insisted I have a mezuzah on my door, and brought me one from Israel. “I know you don’t believe,” he said, “but you should have one anyhow.” I didn’t argue.

In a remarkable 2004 interview, Robert John spoke of his lifelong work in mathematics and game theory, but also of his family — how he would go skiing and mountaineering with some of his nearly 30 children and grandchildren (a kosher cook, carrying saucepans, would accompany them), and the importance of the Sabbath to him.

“The observance of the Sabbath is extremely beautiful,” he said, “and is impossible without being religious. It is not even a question of improving society — it is about improving one’s own quality of life.”

In December of 2005, Robert John received a Nobel Prize for his 50 years

of fundamental work in economics. He was not entirely an easy guest for the Nobel Committee, for he went to Stockholm with his family, including many of those children and grandchildren, and all had to have special kosher plates, utensils and food, and special formal clothes, with no biblically forbidden admixture of wool and linen.

THAT same month, I was found to have cancer in one eye, and while I was in the hospital for treatment the following month, Robert John visited. He was full of entertaining stories about the Nobel Prize and the ceremony in Stockholm, but made a point of saying that, had he been compelled to travel to Stockholm on a Saturday, he would have refused the prize. His commitment to the Sabbath, its utter peacefulness and remoteness from worldly concerns, would have trumped even a Nobel.

In 1955, as a 22-year-old, I went to Israel for several months to work on a kibbutz, and though I enjoyed it, I decided not to go again. Even though so many of my cousins had moved there, the politics of the Middle East disturbed me, and I suspected I would be out of place in a deeply religious society. But in the spring of 2014, hearing that my cousin Marjorie — a physician who had been a protégée of my mother's and had worked in the field of medicine till the age of 98 — was nearing death, I phoned her in Jerusalem to say farewell. Her voice was unexpectedly strong and resonant, with an accent very much like my mother's. "I don't intend to die now," she said, "I will be having my 100th birthday on June 18th. Will you come?"

I said, "Yes, of course!" When I hung up, I realized that in a few seconds I had reversed a decision of almost 60 years. It was purely a family visit. I celebrated Marjorie's 100th with her and extended family. I saw two other cousins dear to me in my London days, innumerable second and removed cousins, and, of course, Robert John. I felt embraced by my family in a way I had not known since childhood.

I had felt a little fearful visiting my Orthodox family with my lover, Billy

— my mother’s words still echoed in my mind — but Billy, too, was warmly received. How profoundly attitudes had changed, even among the Orthodox, was made clear by Robert John when he invited Billy and me to join him and his family at their opening Sabbath meal.

The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness, something akin to nostalgia, wondering *what if*: What if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of a life might I have lived?

In December 2014, I completed my memoir, “On the Move,” and gave the manuscript to my publisher, not dreaming that days later I would learn I had metastatic cancer, coming from the melanoma I had in my eye nine years earlier. I am glad I was able to complete my memoir without knowing this, and that I had been able, for the first time in my life, to make a full and frank declaration of my sexuality, facing the world openly, with no more guilty secrets locked up inside me.

In February, I felt I had to be equally open about my cancer — and facing death. I was, in fact, in the hospital when my essay on this, “My Own Life,” was published in this newspaper. In July I wrote another piece for the paper, “My Periodic Table,” in which the physical cosmos, and the elements I loved, took on lives of their own.

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.

Oliver Sacks is a professor of neurology at the New York University School of

Medicine and the author, most recently, of the memoir “On the Move.”

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