



Another Day in the Monkey's Brain

RALPH MITCHELL SIEGEL

INTRODUCTION BY OLIVER SACKS

OXFORD

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MONKEY'S BRAIN



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To my truest love, my wife, Jasmine: holding hands in a yellow wood, we took the road less travelled by; this has made all the difference in our journey.



“Sweet-in-the-bowl”

To my children, my Dashiell and my Zoe, my endless source of “happy thoughts.” I soar, with hopes and dreams for you, for your literary and scientific selves. You taught me the art of making toe soup, and your encouragement and query echo eternally.



“We all stand upon the shoulders of giants.”

And to my cherished family and friends, my valued colleagues and community members: your relational roles to me often intersect, but I am confident that each one of you will know how you have contributed your inspiration, encouragement, and willingness to be a part of my greater family, and feel the depth of my gratitude for your boundless generosity in spirit, in time, and in energy.

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The Question

To ask the hard question is simple;
Asking at meeting
With the simple glance of acquaintance
To what these go
And how these do:
To ask the hard question is simple,
The simple act of the confused will.
But the answer
Is hard and hard to remember . . .

—W. H. Auden

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INTRODUCTION

by Oliver Sacks

I first met Ralph Siegel in 1973. He was just a teenager then, and his uncle, a dean at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, introduced us. Ralph, at fifteen, was passionate about science and already pondering the relation of brain to mind—"the hard question" that was always the center of his thought.

"He's very bright," I said to his uncle. "Extremely bright. He's too bright to be a doctor; he should be a physiologist." Twenty years later, when Ralph was a physiologist, but had no tenure as yet and was earning only the miserable salary that post-docs get, his father looked at me reproachfully and said, only half-joking, "You prevented my son earning a decent living! If he was a doctor, he would have a house in the suburbs and a decent income, and not be living hand-to-mouth as he does now."

Ralph and I re-met, met properly, at a concert in 1987. We were both sitting in the top circle (in England they say “with the gods”) at Carnegie Hall, and Ralph chanced to be sitting a few rows behind me. We had seen each other, extremely briefly, the previous year when I had visited the Salk Institute—Ralph was closely attached to Francis Crick then; he was, to some degree, as Crick put it, one of Crick’s many “sons-in-science.” When Ralph saw that I had a notebook on my lap and was writing nonstop throughout the concert, he knew the bulky figure ahead of him had to be me. He came up and introduced himself at the end of the concert (I was writing all through the interval), and I recognized him at once—not by his face (most faces look the same to me), but by his flaming red hair.

I suggested supper together at the Carnegie Deli, thinking he would relish one of their famous meat sandwiches—each contained almost a pound of meat. But Ralph was appalled by the idea of pastrami: he was a vegetarian then, and he could not bear the idea of eating anything with neurons. So he had a salad, and I followed suit. Ralph was curious—what had I been writing about through the entire concert? He asked whether I was wholly unconscious of the music. (The program included Mozart’s great G-minor Mass and, after the interval, his Requiem.) No, I said, I was conscious of the music all the time, and not just as background. I said that Nietzsche used to write at concerts, too; he especially loved Bizet, and would say, “Bizet makes me a better philosopher.”

I said I felt that Mozart made me a better neurologist, and that I had been writing about a patient I had seen who had become suddenly unable to see or imagine color following a road accident (and possibly a slight stroke in addition). Ralph was excited; he had heard of this patient, for I had described him to Crick earlier in the year. Ralph's own work was exploring the visual system (using monkeys) in Torsten Wiesel's lab at Rockefeller University, but he would love, he said, to explore more with the colorblind painter, who could tell him exactly what he was seeing (or not seeing). He outlined half a dozen simple but crucial tests that could help pinpoint at what stage the construction of color had broken down in the painter's brain.

I had never heard the word "construction" used in this way before, and I began to realize, in that first meal together, that Ralph immediately thought in deep physiological terms, while neurologists, myself included, often contented ourselves with the surface features, the phenomenology of brain disease or damage, with little thought of the precise mechanism involved . . . and no thought at all of the ultimate question of how experience and consciousness emerged from brain activity. In that first meeting with Ralph, I realized how far neuroscience had come since my own physiology days in the early 1950s, and how, for Ralph, all the questions he explored in the monkey brain, the insights he so patiently collected one by one, were always pointing to that ultimate question. I said I would check with Mr. I., the painter, but I was sure he would welcome Ralph

and any insight he could bring to the situation (as he had welcomed Bob Wasserman, an ophthalmologist friend of mine).

So it was in Ralph that I confronted, and felt confronted with, a very acute neuroscientific mind and realized that the two of us, with our different orientations, could complement each other, form a team, and do work which neither of us could do alone.

In that first dinner at the Carnegie Deli, a friendship began, as well as a partnership, which has lasted ever since. We were both keen cyclists and took long rides together. When, by coincidence, we were both invited to Australia, Ralph not only helped me prepare an inaugural lecture for the newly founded Centre for the Mind, but also came snorkeling and scuba diving with me and my family on the Great Barrier Reef. (My brother was very taken with Ralph, and called him “Dr. Stentor” because of his loud voice, a voice that sometimes enabled him to dispense with a microphone when he lectured or presented papers at scientific meetings.)

Ralph, who had been indifferent to things religious before (he was a Jewish atheist, as I am) was converted into a much more active and deeply felt Judaism after spending a Friday evening, an Erev Shabbat, with my brother and his family in Sydney. (This was ironic, because my brother himself, though fond of the old rituals and prayers, was not particularly observant or much of a believer. Freeman Dyson once wrote, “I am a practicing Christian, but not a believing one,” and my