

Nonbelievers can awaken to Sabbath



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The powerful film, “Awakenings,” starring Robin Williams and Robert De Niro, was meaningful during my early years as a chaplain with people having mental and physical challenges.

Based on the book, the film tells the true story of Oliver Sachs, a neurologist working with people in a New York City hospital, who have, as some would say, “broken brains.” He finds ways of bringing them out of the far-away fog within, back to the reality of life.

Oliver Sachs died in 2015. Two weeks before he died he published a short essay on “Sabbath” (in the book “Gratitude”). Growing up in an Orthodox Jewish home, Sachs moved away from the rituals and the religious beliefs of his physician parents but not from his love of family, respecting their deep commitment to tradition.

In his last weeks, Sachs was very weak — every breath was difficult. Near death, he reflected on the meaning of Sabbath:

“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.”

He concludes, “Perhaps [it’s] 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.”

Sadly, Oliver Sachs was rejected by his mother at 18 when he told his parents he “liked boys.” His mother told him, “I wish you had never been born.”

Some who suffer this kind of traumatic rift grow to hate religion and



Robin Williams, right, played a fictionalized version of Dr. Oliver Sachs in the movie “Awakenings.” Robert De Niro played a patient.

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avoid religious people. Families can be painfully torn apart; wounds may never heal. The synagogue or church, mosque or temple becomes a symbol of separation rather than a sanctuary. Promises of “salvation” (deliverance, healing) seem empty — a call or demand for a person to be rescued from who they are. Such salvation feels more like condemnation or even damnation. And some are told exactly that.

Yet many former believers who become agnostic or atheist choose to hold onto an appreciation for the gifts of the faith community. As a member of The Clergy Project, I hear quite a few ministers and some rabbis express a deep love for the community they once served or continue to serve.

Though TCP members are nonbelievers now, there is a natural, humanistic commitment to helping people in

any way we can. This is living proof that people can live loving, fulfilling lives and be, as we like to say, “Good without God.”

Awakening happens in many unexpected ways. We may see ourselves in a “new light” or learn a fresh truth about our world. We may fall in love or delight in a new friendship. We may witness the birth of a child or watch with wonder as heat-lightning illumines the night sky. We may even face dying or the death of a loved one with a renewed appreciation for each day’s breath.

As Buddhists say, waking up is the essence of our “buddha-nature.” To be “buddha” is to be awake — fully alive. Who doesn’t want that? A Christian may see himself or herself as a “Christ-in-one” who lives the message of being “sent to serve.” For Jews, like Oliver

Sachs, waking up can happen while saying the Shema, dancing with the Torah or performing a “mitzvah” act of service.

For secular freethinkers, small and great awakenings can make every day a kind of Sabbath — rejuvenating days, even moments, when things come into focus, when clarity opens our eyes and life is good (we don’t need T-shirts to tell us).

In my jail chaplaincy days, I would sometimes wander onto a cell block when most inmates were sleeping. It may have been the middle of the day for me, but when all you have is artificial light and the sun never warms your face, why not just sleep? Some told me they were “sleeping off my sentence.” I understood.

At times I would find one man or one woman awake, so I would stop and crouch down to speak with them through the cold steel bars. Some of the best and most meaningful conversations happened in those quiet moments. There was a touch of honesty, of trust and maybe something called “grace” if that can mean human acceptance without judging.

An elderly African-American man asked for a prayer; a young Muslim woman asked for a Qur’an; an evangelical teen requested a visit from her pastor; a gay man was lonely; a Latina woman missed her family.

A chaplain listens, chooses to be fully present — simply “there” and that’s just about all that matters. Those moments are Sabbath as they are awakening.

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