"He was a [passive/active] **witness**" (Oliver Sacks' desired epitaph):

THE ART & JOY OF OSMOTIC CONVERSATIONS

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He wandered the world aimlessly till he discovered the dignity & joy of (my word) osmotic conversations, conversations deep enough for souls to flow into each other--to be, paradoxically, both lost in communion & each more self-found & self-boundaried than ever before. Oliver Sacks, whose uproariously funny & profoundly reflective THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A HAT (based on conversations with his neurological patients--which became an opera that played in Lincoln Center), was asked (by MacNeil/Lehrer last night) "What do you want to be remembered for?" "I want to be remembered, to use a biblical phrase, as a **witness**, someone who listened to those whose neuropathology was too severe for normal social life [the passive sense of "witness," as witnessing an event] & then communicated to society what it's like to be in that tragic condition [the active sense of "witness"]....I struggle to experience the world as they do; I regret I can't actually get inside their skin & look out." (My report is close to verbatim; the square brackets are my additions.).....This Thinksheet reports three osmotic conversations within the past few days--the first two mine, the third that of a former student of mine. This typefont is my comments. This typefont is a conversation's first speaker--I in the first two, a hospital patient in the third. This typefont is the other speaker. The accounts, recorded soon after, are close to verbatim.

Conversation #1 On a train Thursday I sat down next to a wealthy (mink-clad founder & president of her mfg. co.), early-middle-aged, aggressively atheist Jew (who never was observant, nor have her parents ever been: "Jews only in the ethnic sense"). Would you like to share my NYTimes? I read it all before leaving home. I am.... My name is.... Said coolly: definite signal "I'd rather not converse." But coolness is not enough to cut off my witnessing. The victim whom I'm trying to bless must say something like "I'd rather not talk, if you don't mind." Would you be offended were I to inquire as to your religion? I am not religious. In fact, I'm antireligious. I believe only in myself. We make our own reality, each of us.* There is no god above me to rob me of my dignity & remove my responsibility for what I become, what I make of myself. I admire people who take responsibility for themselves & make something of themselves. There's hope for a society whose citizens so set their sails. How to get people to do so is a problem that transcends economics & politics, capitalism & socialism. I'm glad you see it that way. My fisherman's statement was honest. How now "set the hook"? How did you arrive at your life-philosophy? Was it in your first year of college? As a matter of fact, yes. I had a teacher who was into metaphysics, self-direction, reincarnation. He wasn't into spirit-guides? Well, yes, but he didn't make much of that. Why not? It doesn't really go with the central concept that we make our own reality. I agree. So, to be consistent, you don't believe in spirit-guides? Well, yes, I do. There's some comfort in believing you're not alone, that somebody out there, beyond human beings, cares what happens to you, has good will for you, helps you on your way with a wisdom beyond your own. So true. In your own mind, have you ever connected these spirit-guides with what the Bible calls "angels"? She becomes slightly agitated, though without losing her dignity. And she looks into the aisle, which is on the other side of me: I am in the way of her leaving her seat, being as I am on the way to helping her leave her life-philosophy. I am omitting the conversation's smalltalk (where she grew up, her family, etc.), as irrelevant to this Thinksheet, but important in keeping the conversation from being relentlessly heavy. No, I haven't made that connection. I know almost nothing of the Bible, nor do I want to. Like it or not, there's functional congruity between your spirit-guides & the Bible's angels & God, & this means there's a bridge between your life-philosophy & mine. Let me state mine, so you can translate into yours. God loves you, sent the patriarchs & prophets to guide you, came to you in the person of his Son Jesus to teach, live, die, rise for you, & is with you & me now in the Holy Spirit as were are talking with each other. Call it my way, the Bible's way, of spelling out what you mean by spirit-guides. Even if I can see it that way intellectually, I'm not about to practice any religion. Depends, doesn't it, on how you define a religion, whether as praxis or as institution. I hear you as saying you're not about to relate to any religious institution. But you are practicing your religion, your way of seeing & living in the world. In this sense, the only nonreligious folk are those who've not chosen how to see the world & therefore not committed themselves to live a vision. You are certainly not one of the indecisive, the uncommitted. On top of that, your metaphysics teaches that you have an immortal soul that makes repeated trips through bodies till it has no further need of a body, having learned enough through its body-trips to be "enlightened." Surely you realize that's religious, specifically Hindic (Hindu, Buddhist, et al). At this point we weren't far from Grand Central, so I didn't get into her self-contradiction in living a this-world affirming life (which fits true biblical religion) while talking a this-world denying life (her aim being to be rid of bodies--in spite, I noticed, or her having a beautiful bod). I didn't get to try to undermine her metempsychosis-reincarnation with my doctrine of the resurrection. I must admit I've given almost no thought to these matters

* The most developed form of this American-gnostic religion is THE SEAT OF THE SOUL (Simon & Shuster/89), by Gary Zukav.

since college. Too busy making your own reality? Or just too busy making it? Smiling: All right, I admit it! In your business you travel a lot. While you are at it, do some traveling, some spiritual exploring, in your life. Drop in on Jewish & Christian worship. Try the Psalms in the Gideon Bible in your hotel-motel room. Help the spirit-guides, help the Holy Spirit, move you toward enlightenment. OK. Grand Central.

Conversation #2 Snowing, so I took a cab from NYTSeminary to the Whitney. Black male cabbie. Friday afternoon near gridlock, so time for a longish conversation. Which African country are you from? Ghana. How long ago? Seventeen years, but I go back every other year to see my family. No family here? No relatives. No wife & kids: New York is no place to raise a family. I could though: I'm divorced. Sorry to hear that. You must get lonely. How is it between you & Jesus? Wonderful! And it keeps getting better! Even though Jesus is how I lost my family. How was that? It's a long story, but with this slow-moving traffic, we've got time for it--if you really want to hear it. I do. Shoot. Twenty years ago I stood in the door of a church & listened to the end of a sermon. I had gone to the church for the fun of stealing Christian shoes, as I'd often done before, passing them through the black market: both Christians & Muslims, in my country, leave their shoes outside when they go in to worship. I was Muslim, from a fundamentalist Muslim family, & my wife & children were Muslims. Well, as I was picking up a pair of shoes, I heard the preacher shout something that got my attention. I put down the shoes, stood in the doorway, & was converted to Jesus before the sermon ended. But when I arrived home & told my family, my wife would have nothing further to do with me, & soon had her divorce. Next day I went to my parents' home, & they rejected me. My father is rich, & as only son I was in line to inherit it all. But he said, "Unless you give up this Jesus nonsense, you'll not inherit as much as a single pin." Looking my father in the eye, I said, "Father, in comparison with my heavenly Father, you are a poor man." I came to New York, cabbed 14-17 hours a day 7 days a week, & now own my own cab & medallion. I couldn't be happier! "My Father is rich in houses & lands, / He holdest the wealth of the world in his hands"! I'm happy in my church, & make enough money to help needy others & to go back home every other year. What a wonderful witness! I hope you get to tell it often. Not many would be interested in hearing it. Tell it anyway. Practice how to tell it so it creates interest. That way, you bless others & have the joy of witnessing, sharing what's deepest in your heart. God meets all my needs. My health was not good before my conversion, but it's so good I haven't been to a doctor these twenty years! I do have a lot of arthritis, though, sitting in this cab such long hours, & every day but Sunday. Do you believe in spiritual healing? I believe in spiritual trusting, saying yes to God no matter what happens to my body. A few months ago I went blind in my left eye, & I pray for God's healing, & trust God's presence--like Job--no matter what. As for doctors, they can be instruments of God's healing: I'd advise you to go in for a complete checkup. Thanks, thanks for everything, & God bless you! I'll pray for your eyes! And I'll pray for your arthritis! Thanks for your witness. God bless you always.

Conversation #3 Saturday I mentioned, to a former student of mine, the cabbie conversation of the day before. She is in great pain, awaiting spinal surgery; but she continues her volunteer hospital-visiting. A few days before, she closed a visit with a prayer & closed with "In God's name, Amen." Said the patient, with downcast countenance: Thank you, but I wish you had closed "In Jesus' name, Amen." But the hospital record on you has "Hebrew"! I don't know how they got that. Ethnically I'm Jewish, but in religion I'm a Christian. Why it especially hurts when Christians treat me as though I were a Jew in religion is this: When I became a Christian, all my family & relatives rejected me & have refused to have anything to do with me since. My family, now, is Christians. I've paid a high price for the name of Jesus, so I had to speak out when you avoided his name, for me the sweetest name. I am sorry, & I'll never forget what you have taught me. Said I to the visitor after thanking her for the story, "Thinking the patient a Jew in religion, you were right not to conclude the prayer 'In Jesus' name, Amen.' But since you are a Christian, you were wrong not to conclude with Jesus' name. How could that have been? I'll tell you a story to show you. A few weeks ago, preparing to participate in leading an ecumencial worship, I said to the young Roman priest who was also to be a leader, 'How do you intend to use Jesus' name?' Said he, 'I don't. I never do in an ecumenical service.' Said I, 'Not to use Jesus' name violates your ordination.' He blinked, & said, 'How can I?' I said, conclude your prayer 'I pray in Jesus' name.' Everybody knows you do, so do it. Others then are free to pray in whatever name they choose." Said the visitor to me, "I won't forget! It's a relief, & joy, to have that one solved."