

Who is a person?

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [January 26, 2000](#) issue

Two of the most powerful intellectual and social forces in our culture are the hard sciences and capitalist economics. Together they have conspired to produce images of personhood that undermine Christian understandings. According to these images, persons are defined by their rational capacities and their productive contributions. These images often lead us to dangerous judgments at the edges of life: we consider genetic testing for mental handicaps and abortion at the beginning of life, and euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide at the end.

Christianity presumes that we are creatures made in the image and likeness of God, destined for communion with God. The praise of God in Christian worship invites persons to participate regardless of their cognitive abilities or their productive usefulness.

Oliver Sacks illumines this point in his story of Jimmie G., “The Lost Mariner,” in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Jimmie was a charming, intelligent and handsome 49-year-old man. Unfortunately, he had lost his memory. Puzzled by the phenomenon of an otherwise healthy man who had lost his capacity to remember, Sacks asked himself, “What sort of a life (if any), what sort of world, what sort of a self, can be preserved in a man who has lost the greater part of his memory and, with this, his past and his moorings in time?”

Jimmie was able neither to function rationally nor to contribute productively in a job. He lived his life as if he were still 19, for his memory had frozen some 30 years earlier. He could not remember events or people from day to day, or even from minute to minute. Sacks thought of Jimmie as a lost self, a lost soul, unaware of his condition because it engulfed him and the world into the vortex of a meaningless present.

Perhaps Sacks’s bewilderment was as much a factor of modernity’s restricted conception of personhood as anything else. Sacks concluded that since medical science was unaware of a way to help Jimmie, Jimmie was probably “beyond help.” “One tended to speak of [Jimmie] instinctively as a spiritual casualty—a ‘lost soul,’” said Sacks. “Was it possible that he had really been ‘desouled’ by a disease?”

Sacks spoke with Roman Catholic nuns who cared for Jimmie in a nursing home. “Do you think he has a soul?” The sisters were outraged by the question, but understood why Sacks asked it. “Watch Jimmie in chapel,” they said, “and judge for yourself.” So Sacks observed Jimmie in worship:

I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him. . . . I watched him kneel and take the sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the mass. Fully, intensely, quietly, in the quietude of absolute concentration and attention, he entered and partook of the holy communion.

Sacks realized that Jimmie’s soul was revealed in the act of moral attention in worship, and in the aesthetic and dramatic activity of praising God. His soul was touched, held and stilled as he gave his attention to the liturgy and participated in communion. He had no difficulty in “following” music or simple dramas, “for every moment in music and art refers to, contains, other moments.” He would fall apart in purely mental activities, but in worship he found a profound peace in and through emotional and spiritual attention to art, music and the mass.

Jimmie's personhood could not be circumscribed by memory, productivity or rationality. Moving beyond the limits of ordinary cognitive ability, Jimmie praised God with body and soul.