

You're Who? (excerpts)

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You're back from your business trip and step off the plane. You roll your carry-on past security, spot your boyfriend in the crowd, and smile. You wrap your arms around him, gaze into his eyes, and stretch up for a kiss. He lurches back and shoves you away.

He's not your boyfriend.

You have an appointment with the same doctor you've been seeing in the same office for years. As you stand in the lobby a few minutes later, a woman walks by and smiles at you. She seems to know you so you smile back, but you don't recognize her.

She's your doctor.

You're staring at a school photo, trying to remember exactly who it is in the picture. You can't remember.

It's you.

If these stories seem familiar enough to be your own, you might have a condition that until recently was almost unknown: *prosopagnosia*, also called *face blindness*. And you're in a lot of company, including writer Heather Sellers, neurologist Oliver Sacks, and computer consultant Cecilia Burman, who are severely face-blind and whose stories you've just read.

Almost all of us can identify thousands of faces and pick out people we know in a crowd. But some people cannot recognize faces at all, even those of family members, colleagues, friends, and themselves. Every time they meet the people they share their lives with, they're meeting strangers.

Face-blind portrait artist Chuck Close describes what he sees when he looks at another person's face: "You move your face one-half inch, it's a whole new face I've never seen before."¹ Close,

who is famous for his gigantic detailed portraits, is sure that his face blindness drives him to paint faces. He needs to flatten people's images to see their faces as faces.

Oliver Sacks relates his experience at a café: "Sitting at a sidewalk table, I turned toward the restaurant window and began grooming my beard, as I often do. I then realized that what I had taken to be my reflection was not grooming himself, but looking at me oddly."² More than once, Dr. Sacks has almost bumped into a full-length mirror and excused himself to the other man, not recognizing his own reflection.



If you have trouble identifying only some of the people in your life, maybe only sometimes, you might have a milder form of face blindness. Milder forms range from slightly below to far below average ability to identify the faces of the people you know.

Until she gets to know the humans and chimpanzees in her life, primatologist Jane Goodall can spend all day with them but the next day have no idea who they are. In *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*, she describes her inability to recognize faces: "I suffer from an embarrassing, curiously humbling neurological condition called *prosopagnosia*, which, translated, means I have problems in face recognition. I used to think it was due to some mental laziness, and I tried desperately to memorize the faces of people I met. . . . I had no trouble with those who had obvious physical characteristics – unusual bone structure, beaky nose, extreme beauty or the opposite. But with other faces I failed, miserably."³



The inability to recognize other people's faces was documented throughout the 19th century and was thought to be a rare result of brain injury or due to neurological conditions that affect specific brain areas. Congenital face blindness, which runs in families, was almost unknown until the late 20th century. We now understand that face blindness cripples the lives of 2 to 2.5

percent of the world's population: eight million people in the United States and 175 million worldwide.

For every 40 or so people we work with, socialize with, and live with, one of them is probably face-blind. The child with face blindness might be that one girl in class who endures every awkward school day with children and adults who seem to know her but whom she can't identify. She might be labeled stuck-up, be bullied, and have a stunted social life. To survive navigating through a sea of strangers every day and to live the most normal life she can, she devises tricks and strategies to help her remember, or pretend to remember, the people behind all those incomprehensible faces. She may not even realize she's different and just assume that everyone uses her system to try to identify everyone else.

Thinking hard to remember her teacher's face won't work, so she becomes a master at decoding context. She remembers him as a blurred face with curly red hair, a mustache, glasses, and a big nose. But if her teacher cuts his hair, shaves his mustache, or gets new glasses, he might become a total stranger. Her only friend might be the girl in class who always wears pink or that one tall boy. After school, she waits outside and gets into the car with whoever calls her name.

1. *Strangers in the Mirror*, Radiolab. Radiolab Podcast Articles, June 15, 2010.
<http://www.radiolab.org/blogs/radiolab-blog/2010/jun/15/strangers-in-the-mirror/>
2. *Strangers in the Mirror*, Radiolab. Radiolab Podcast Articles, June 15, 2010.
<http://www.radiolab.org/blogs/radiolab-blog/2010/jun/15/strangers-in-the-mirror/>
3. *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*, Goodall, Jane and Berman, Phillip L. Warner Books, Inc., New York. 1999. pp. xiii-xiv.